

THE
RED DIAMOND

JOHN WICKENRIDGE, EDITOR

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THE THIRD DIAMOND

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BY
JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

AUTHOR OF "FRAN"



RICHARD G. BADGER

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BOSTON

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Some lay their roses on the grave,

MY MOTHER—

Rest mine upon your brow;

Some distant day, perchance, the tender
recollection—

The perfume, now.

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THE THIRD DIAMOND

CHAPTER I

AN ENGAGEMENT

“**D**O you want to go, too, Father?” asked Minna as she stepped lightly into the automobile.

Until then, he had not thought of her going to the station without him, but something in the tone of her voice made him say, hesitatingly, “I suppose it’s not necessary.”

Mrs. Flood, divining her husband’s disappointment, called timidly from the front porch, “Your father has been driving the machine all his spare time, since he bought it for you, a month ago; I’m sure he understands how to manage it, even as well as you do.”

Minna, just back to the farm from her last

year at a fashionable young ladies' boarding-school, smiled sweetly. "Awfully good of you, Father, to take so much trouble. And so splendid of you both to get me the auto — I just love it! But I won't need anybody to drive me."

Mrs. Flood beamed. "We could tell from your letters how you'd miss the automobile when you came home, so we determined to surprise you. And its brown color just matches your brown hair and eyes. If you want your father to go —"

"Oh, no, Mother, there's really no need at all," cried Minna, gayly. "I know how tired he is, overseeing all those carpenters and farmhands. Good-by — good-by!" And the machine which all this time had been quivering and panting impotently, turned toward the gate and started down the road across the pasture. She did not suspect that her father really wanted to go — she had already been home twenty-four hours, after her nine months' absence, so of course everybody had had time to get tired of looking at her. Besides, it did not seem that age and automobiles went together. The

farmer was already turning gray — it was so comfortable always to find him right there on the farm whenever she came back, looking after his men and cattle.

Minna did not intend to go straight to the station; there was too much time to waste it on a three-mile drive. Ever since hearing that Jack Palmer was engaged to Juanita Smith — news her father had been eager to impart — she had felt a strong desire to see Jack, to find if he looked different from the days when he was engaged to *her*. Of course, that was a year ago, when she was a mere child — now, she was eighteen. And, of course, she didn't mind, and Juanita Smith was welcome to Jack; Minna did not care for Jack or anybody else; all the same, she wanted to see him — it must be so interesting to watch Jack in his anomalous condition of being engaged to somebody else. But her father would not have understood this desire to turn out of the way to pass Jack's farm, to stop, if necessary, and cry gayly, blithely, "O Jack!" Grown people, that is, people old enough to be young ladies' fathers and mothers,

live in an old-people's world. Minna lived in a young-people's world, the world that Jack lived in — Jack and his Juanita Smith — how odd!

Zack Flood, shirt-sleeved and straw-hatted, walked slowly back to the house mechanically twisting a straw about his fingers; that meant that he was disappointed; but his wife, watching from the porch, could see only their daughter.

“Zack, she's the prettiest girl in the county — look how she holds herself — the auto is just like a feather in her hands. . . . And so dainty and aristocratic-looking — so sweet about our surprising her with the machine — nobody was ever more grateful for little kindnesses than our Minna. I wish you'd gone with her as far as the road-gate. She would have liked to have you along, and, besides, sometimes it doesn't spring open when the wheel presses the rod.”

“If I can't go all the way,” remarked Zack, dryly, “I'm not going to the gate.”

Mrs. Flood was instantly on the defensive. “There was no reason why you shouldn't have gone to the station with Minna — and she knew you were tired out — but there was no reason

for you *to* go — it's well enough for Minna to meet her cousin alone; young people get acquainted better when old people are not around."

"Who are 'old people,' Minnie? Well —" he stood beside her watching the automobile as it successfully passed through the big gate, "you are right about her looks. She is certainly cut out of high-grade cloth, and, in comparison, the girls around here look like they'd been picked up at a loom-end sale."

His wife patted his arm. "Look, Zack, how the sunlight gleams on her hair. Was there anything as pretty in the world? And that profile of peach-blossom, so dainty, so — so aristocratic. . . . Let's turn away, it's bad luck to watch her out of sight."

"And bad luck to lose sight of our carpenters, Minnie — I do believe every hammer has stopped. And that'll never do, for we've got to build fast to keep up with Minna. You know we've added a room to our original shack every time daughter has expanded a new notch." The tall, sandy-mustached farmer smiled tolerantly.

/

"This old-and-new farm-house is a record of her progress from the cradle."

Mrs. Flood did not smile because she was afraid there might be some lack of respect to Minna in these words. "I don't know just what you do mean, Zack, you are sometimes so strange, when you try to express yourself (Minna has noticed it, too), but one thing is certain, no one ever had a more obedient daughter than Minna."

"How do you know, Minnie? Did you ever test her?"

His wife's face was blank.

"I mean, honey, did you ever tell her to do anything unless you knew beforehand that she wanted to do it?"

While Mrs. Flood was indignantly refuting this half-humorous charge, the object of the fond parents' discussion was speeding not toward the station, but in the direction of Jack Palmer's farm. When you have known a young man well enough to be engaged to him, what harm lies in seeking a casual greeting — a call, as it were, across the fence he has erected by

his recent engagement to another girl? Minna's veins tingled with the excitement of doing something she knew to be quite innocent, but which old people might not understand. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes sparkled, her red lips trembled in the melting ripples of swiftly succeeding smiles. Ah, it was good to be home after a horrid year's grind at school — which, by the way, did not seem at all horrid now that she looked back upon the past months with their keen delights of sorority suppers and their pale reminders of recitation-hours. Those recitation-hours had always been interrupting the real business of life — if it hadn't been for the actual necessity of studying, possibly the theater-parties and midnight-suppers and the constant use of a friend's automobile might have kept her less homesick. Anyway, here she was once more at home, and her heart leaped high — yonder was Jack's farm, smiling in the sunlight like an old friend.

And there was Jack, himself, the same Jack, even stouter perhaps, but not handsomer — that was impossible. He was not glad to see Minna

— had she been an angel of light in an automobile it would have been all the same to the spirited young horse he was exercising; and anything that made Jack get out in the middle of a dusty country-road in the hot sun to hold a troublesome horse was an unwelcome thing to him. The young man made no secret of the fact that he found all violent exertion distasteful, but he wore his laziness with such a charming air that the very souls of industry regarded him with tolerance.

In the college-town where Minna had enjoyed her friend's machine, automobiles were no more terrifying to the horses than milk to a pet lamb brought up on the bottle. In the present dilemma she did not know whether to dart past the frantic animal, or try to stop before reaching it. On one side was a tree, on the other, a long, steep ditch. Jack stood near the tree clinging desperately to the horse which was kicking the buggy to pieces. Minna had slowed down, at the same time edging toward the ditch. A frantic plunge of the horse unnerved her, and the automobile ran over the margin of the ra-

vine before she could shut off the power. It paused on the steep depression, its lower side-wheels buried in mud so far below the upper ones that it seemed a miracle its equilibrium was preserved.

The last frenzied effort of the horse freed it of the buggy, and rearing on its hind legs it threw off the hands of its master. With a bound it shot forward and went racing down the road like a fleeing shadow. "Go on!" shouted Jack, waving his arm after it. "Go on! Go on! Go on to the—I beg your pardon, Minna, glad to see you. Got back from college, eh? And how are you?"

He slowly crossed the street, languidly dabbing at his handsome dark face with his handkerchief, and emitting a long whistle to express exhaustion. His smile was not all one of humorous recognition of his dusty plight; the picture presented by Minna as she still clung to the guiding-wheel was too charming to fail to evoke a gleam of admiration. His mind slipped back to the days when Juanita Smith was a negligible factor in the sum of his social adventures.

“ Oh, Jack, I am so, *so* sorry! —”

“ Let me help you out of that thing before it turns over; and being sorry, I’ll prepare for you the stool of repentance.”

She looked down at him with a distressed curve of her mouth, but with fun in her eyes — he was so like the good old times.

“ You may help me down — but where is the stool of repentance? ”

“ Here’s a nice shady tree — I’ll spread my coat for you — if it’s still in the buggy; there’s a lovely little hillock right where the shade’s thickest. You’ll have to cross the road, though, and that will ruin your slippers; would you permit me to carry you as they did in the romances? ”

She answered lightly, “ I am not in a romance,” but there was something wistful in her far-away look.

“ But you are in white slippers. No? Very well — I’ll get my coat if the horse hasn’t kicked it to rags.”

“ But we mustn’t sit under that tree. I am on the way to the station to meet Richard, and the train is on time. And besides, I believe you

could get my auto out of the mud with one of those fence-rails, especially if you called someone to help."

He cast a fleeting look at the automobile but kept on toward his smashed-up buggy. "Here's the coat — it still has the collar on." He spread it on the grass, where the shadow fell at an inner angle of the fence. "You must excuse me, Minna, for speaking plainly to an old friend,— but I'm not going to work myself to death to prize your auto out of the mud. And as for walking to the next farm after help, it wouldn't be any use. Everybody is out in the cornfield except Alfred and he's in his buggy driving up and down by your father's place hoping to get a glimpse of you."

Minna laughed. "But, Jack, it will be so perfectly ridiculous, sitting here on the roadside —"

"Minna, you pretend to be repentant but you're not half sorry enough. Let me tell you I have nothing left in this world. The buggy is ruined, and the horse is gone. Now, will you sit down and be good? And I hope you won't

mind if I smoke." He seated himself with his back against the tree and sighed in content — "This *is* comfort!" He looked at her in full appreciation of her radiant beauty.

Minna, seated upon the coat, leaned forward to pluck a seeded stem of bluegrass. "You have your farm, you know," she reasoned.

"Oh, no, I haven't. Everything's gone."

"Everything?"

"Yeh."

"But — but how?"

"I'm sure I don't know — just went."

"*Everything*, Jack?"

"Everything."

"No, no — you have Juanita."

"Oh, yes; I'd forgotten her." Jack lit a cigarette. There was an uncertain silence, then — "Yes, I have Juanita. Minna, what was it you and I quarreled about, last year?"

"*Did* we quarrel?" she asked, opening her eyes wide.

"If we didn't, where did Juanita come in?"

"I don't understand you in the least. And I believe that's the train whistling."

"I think it is, too. I guess Dicky will have to walk."

"If you would find somebody to help prize the car out of the ditch — I know you could find a man if you'd try."

"But the sun is so hot — and it's so dusty — Minna, just think about how sorry you are, that ought to fill your mind to the brim. Yes, — it was because you persisted in dancing with Alfred Montgomery; you knew he was in love with you, yet knowing it, and him with that name such as no son of the soil has a right to! — and after I had marked that dance, too — Well, it's all over, of course. Minna, did your father ever find out we were engaged?"

"I don't know how you can call it *that* — we were just children."

"Well, whatever you call it, did your father know about it?"

Minna dimpled. "You don't think I'd bother father and mother with such things do you? — they'd worry, and *couldn't* understand."

"I'm glad I don't think as little of myself as your father does! Mr. Flood can't bear the

sight of me and that's why I've imagined you told him of our engagement and he put his foot down. Then you didn't dance with Alfred Montgomery that time because your father scolded you for wearing my ring?"

Minna was amused and astonished. "Surely you can't imagine I'd tell him about *rings*. A *father* wouldn't understand. Of course not, Jack, you are just as ridiculous as ever! I danced with Alfred — because I wanted to."

"No, that isn't the reason; it was because you didn't want to. Listen — are those wheels? If it's your father coming, I imagine he'll find something else hard for him to understand."

"Ditto Juanita Smith," murmured Minna, who felt secure about her father and indifferent about Juanita.

A buggy came in sight. "Blessed if it isn't that Alfred Montgomery!" exclaimed Jack with a whistle. "That fellow seems to know by instinct which way you go." He rose, impatiently.

"Yes, help me up," murmured Minna, reaching out her hand; "one is always so proper

when Alfred is present. When he comes into a room, people remember to try to be good."

"That's why he's so unpopular," Jack remarked.

When the buggy stopped abreast of them, the driver presented a sharp contrast to the young man standing under the tree. Alfred Montgomery seemed taller and thinner from being brought into the same field of vision with Jack Palmer's one hundred and ninety pounds, and any charm of the gaunt young student's face was discounted by the rounded cheeks, the full, well-formed mouth, the jolly black eyes — in a word the whole air of good-feeding, good-feeling and graceful languor of Minna's companion.

Alfred leaped to the ground and there were greetings full of delicious romance for him not untouched by vague misgivings. Minna threw a weight of pleased surprise into her smile and handclasp, because, found under the tree with Jack, she marked the more distinctly all externals of delight. She said she was so glad to see him after her year's absence and why should

he doubt it, since he was thrilled to the heart at the touch of her hand. But was she *that* glad? Why not, since Jack was now safely out of the way — irretrievably betrothed to Juanita Smith, the fact publicly and officially stamped with a dinner and a “shower” looking forward to the wedding-day, three months distant.

“You’d better hold that horse of yours,” remarked Jack, who found the greetings too protracted; they had shaken hands, they had asked how each other was, they had talked about the mired machine, and now Alfred had better go along. “That horse of yours is skittish; it’s no more auto-proof than the beast I once owned.”

Alfred was ready to go. He would take Minna home and bring strong men to exhume the wheels —

“Oh, no, you don’t,” retorted Jack, decidedly. “Minna can’t leave this spot. She has to watch her — I mean that train has already come and Richard must be met; you can meet her.”

“Oh, please do, Alfred!” exclaimed Minna in sudden distress — she had forgotten Rich-

ard. "Poor little thing, it will seem so strange to her — Richard is my little cousin; do you remember her?"

Alfred shook his head. "If Jack knows her," he suggested, "he can take my horse —"

"Oh, come!" Jack expostulated. "Look here, Alf, do you mean to pretend you've forgotten that little girl that visited Minna two or three years ago — the skinny little creature with the very dark complexion and the very big eyes, the girl that was named Richard, in short?"

Alfred turned to Minna with the air of a martyr — "Do you want me to go?"

"Alfred, it would be perfectly lovely of you. Poor Richard lost her father a year ago, and now she's coming to live with us — she has no one else — I know she is at the station now, feeling miserable because we aren't there to meet her — won't you explain about the automobile?"

With grave cheerfulness, Alfred climbed into his buggy. "I'm to look for a little girl named Richard — ?"

"Richard Warding."

“Very skinny; very big eyes; very dark — ?”

“Yes; or at least was, about three years ago.”

“Also very young?”

“She ought to be sixteen, now, I think.”

“Let us hope she’s been good,” remarked Jack, “and that she *is* sixteen. To that, you must add a long period of waiting at the station.”

“Poor Richard!” Minna exclaimed with compunction.

“And if she has her Almanac, *that* would help identify her,” Jack added as an afterthought.

Minna turned her back upon Jack. “Alfred, I can’t thank you enough for this trouble and — and kindness.”

As her grateful eyes met his, Alfred’s thin face glowed. He shook the lines, and his restive horse dashed away that Richard might not wait a moment longer than necessary.

When he was gone, Minna turned to her companion and looked at him with a slow smile. “Almanac!” she repeated. Her rebuke might

as easily have been a laugh. She found him a mere boy after Alfred's earnestness; his physical appeal was enhanced, and the lightness of his wit still unapproachable. Of course the old days were dead and buried — but there could never be another Jack Palmer. Apparently Alfred Montgomery was as devoted as ever; nobody was truer, or more useful, or more willing than poor Alfred. But oh, the sunny, good-natured, easy-going, life-enjoying selfishness of this Jack Palmer! It made her smile to think of it.

“Aren't you tired?” inquired Jack, looking about for the densest shade; “let's sit down!”

CHAPTER II

CONFIDENCES

WHEN Alfred drove up to the Pendleton station its closed doors and windows, and his knowledge that there would not be another train till morning, made him conclude that the place was deserted; but as he turned half-round with the intention of seeking Minna Flood's cousin at the hotel, he caught sight of someone around the corner. On the platform skirting the sidetrack, the shadow of the station-house threw a triangular shadow and in the apex of this shadow sat a girl on a small trunk, her back toward the young man.

Alfred tied his horse to a ring in the floor and went around the red building which was silent save for the spasmodic clicking in the empty telegraph-office. The girl held a notebook in one hand, a pencil in the other, while

her handbag rested upon her lap, its black, shiny side doing service as a desk. A broad-brimmed hat concealed her face, but her thin, angular form was revealed in the homely dress designed to wear rather than to fit. The economy scheme suggested by the cheap hat and meager skirt was carried out in the heavy shoes; there could be no doubt that here sat a poor relation.

"Very skinny," reflected Alfred; and, in order to verify the rest of Jack Palmer's description, he said, aloud, "Writing back home?"

The big hat flashed round and its flaring white band framed a dark face strongly suggestive of a certain type of beauty which as yet sixteen years had failed to realize,—a face marked by vivacity which no additional number of years could be expected to quicken. Perhaps her spectacles interfered with good looks and heightened the impression of wisdom; at any rate, they were the finishing touch to a picture so quaint and unusual that he was both amused and touched.

"I was plotting," she said, getting off the trunk as quickly as the handbag, notebook and

pencil permitted. "How do you do, Mr. Montgomery. Did they send you for me?"

"Then this is Richard?" They shook hands. "But how could you know me?"

"I was here three years ago," she reminded him, with a grave smile; "I remember all the old people, you especially."

"Was I especially old, three years ago?" He reached for her handbag protestingly. Perhaps the loneliness of the scene strengthened his sense of her unusualness. Against the background of dusty freight-cars standing with doors rolled back, of tracks glimmering away to steel points, of rutted roads with their white glare and smell of sun-scorched weeds, the girl stood out sharply-defined as a newcomer from some unknown world.

"I'd rather carry it, please," she said, holding the handbag against her breast; "my manuscript's in it."

Alfred found himself wondering why he didn't laugh; the inclination was strong, though he was a rather serious, thoughtful young man; it must have been her eyes that preserved his

gravity. Jack Palmer had pronounced them "very big" and so they were, while in their dark gray depths, timid yet investigating, looked forth a spirit of unrest.

"I thought you very, very old, because I was so young," she went on. "But I liked it. Children have never appealed to me, because they interrupt one. I think children the great interruptions of life." She made a step toward the buggy as if to indicate that she had closed that subject. "Can we get my trunk hauled out to the farm this evening? I thought Uncle Zack would have sent a wagon."

Alfred explained that the trunk was to have been put in the automobile — however, the owner of a spring-wagon devoted to light hauling, lived not far out of their way.

"Is it a *very* small wagon?" Richard asked, doubtfully. "My property will come in a few days and a small wagon might not be able to hold it all. And we ought to make a bargain with whoever hauls the trunk, to haul my property; you can get it done cheaper that way."

Alfred was unfastening his horse; he looked up in surprise. "So you are moving here?"

"I am to live with Uncle Zack. When father died everything was sold that I could spare. Uncle Zack wanted me to come right to his place, then, but there's no place like Tinsville. Ever since I can remember, father preached for a church there; we got poorer and poorer, but he was determined for me to graduate at Tinsville College — were you ever at Tinsville?"

"I may have passed through," Alfred could not remember having ever heard of the place before. He helped her in the buggy and they drove off.

"It's the dearest town! The people are not very friendly, but I just love the sidewalks — I know where all the broken planks are. After everything was sold, there was enough to board me a year and get me through college; I'm pretty young to graduate but I got started a long time ago. Uncle Zack — he's my guardian — agreed to let me stay to finish, it was, oh, so independent, paying my own money

for everything, the money father had earned with his very heart's blood. And oh, it was so dear, living right there in Tinsville . . . seemed like I could hear his voice and his footsteps and the way he'd shut the gate and then shake it to be sure it was fast. All the time the train was bringing me here, father's footsteps seemed to be dying away — dying away —" The voice broke with a sob. "I'm afraid I'll not hear them again so far away from home."

"But this is home, now," Alfred gave her arm a sympathetic pat as he drove rapidly away from the straggling outskirts of Pendleton.

"Yes. And of course the place doesn't adorn the person," she remarked in a matter-of-fact tone, as she dried her eyes. "I realize that whatever I'm to be depends on what I do before I can be it." She folded her small hands on her knees and looked through her spectacles very intently as if trying to make out the peak of some high but exceedingly remote ideal.

"May I ask what you are to be, Richard?"

"A Power," she answered, simply.

He glanced sidewise at the thin, girlish figure

which could hardly have looked less like the realization of her ambition. "Perhaps you were plotting for power," he suggested respectfully, "when I first saw you?"

"I am an author," she explained simply. "Have you forgotten about the wagon to haul my trunk?"

"The fact is, after what you said about your property, I concluded it would be best for Mr. Flood to order the dray by telephone — one large enough to hold your furniture. Have you had any of your works published?"

"Yes, but only in the *Tinsville Weekly*," she answered, modestly. "I suppose you have never seen the *Tinsville Weekly* — it is local. It isn't furniture to be hauled, but books. That's all I have, just books; sixteen boxes full, and the boxes are quite large. It takes four men to lift some of them. It's a library. The books are my tools. I hope with these tools," she added, cheerfully, "to break open the door of Fame. Of course I know it'll be pretty hard, but I don't enjoy doing easy things, do you? It makes you feel that you are only an or-

dinary person when you do what everybody else is doing. I have always been serious-minded. You must be serious-minded to accomplish very much. You see, there are so many things for me to overcome — I am poor, oh, you can't feel *how* poor; though you know I haven't a thing but those books, it's different from feeling it. You've got to *be* the thing to feel how it is. And then, besides poverty, I am homely —"

"I do not think you at all homely, Richard; your face if you will let an old man say so, is very bright — and — and very sweet."

The color stole into her cheeks. "I do not think you are an old enough man for me to permit you to call me that. Of course I am just a child to you, but I am a grown woman to myself. It's what you are to yourself that makes you anything at all to outsiders."

Alfred inquired gravely, "Perhaps it is wrong in me to call you 'Richard.' Should I say 'Miss Warding'?"

"I think it would be very nice of you. And I will admit that it didn't *really* displease me, what you said — I mean about my looks. I

know I am not what you would call ugly; but all you have to do is to put me beside Cousin Minna to know that if I ever succeed, it'll not be because of my face. As for form, there is none."

Alfred had an impulse to laugh outright, and another impulse to put his arm about the exceedingly erect figure and give her a hearty embrace as a sign of the exhilarating delight he took in her personality. Repressing these tendencies, he addressed her with the solemnity due one philosopher from another — "Authorship, I presume, comes natural to you?"

She glowed. "I look around on these beautiful farms we are passing — the miles of fields and pastures with the ponds and the cows standing in the shade — and it makes me want to write. What? I don't know. I suppose in due time I shall know just *what* to write; now, I only feel that I must write — something. That shows that it was born in me. Some authors are made. I may be made, too; but I'll be made out of what I was in the beginning. The main thing I need is experience. When

father died, somehow it was the people who had lost their fathers that could say something in a way to do me good. They said the same things the others said — and oh, Mr. Montgomery, there isn't anything to say unless you've felt the words for yourself. If you've felt it, don't be afraid to speak out. I don't want to write words, I want to write feelings. That's why I'm so limited by my age, and by having never traveled, or known many different kinds of people. Almost everybody I ever knew were all of the same kind." There was a pause, then she added, musingly:

"I have looked on death, but I have never known love."

"They're similar," Alfred declared, promptly.

Richard looked at him with no suggestion of humor in her eyes which were at once shy and brave. Her eagerness for enlightenment seemed blended with gentle sympathy while her thought hovered on the farthest verge of speech. Alfred had the queer impression that she was reaching forth with a sort of spiritual dipper

to ladle a brimming bowl of experience out of his heart; but so kind and delicate was the hand on the handle that he did not flinch.

"You may ask any question," he said, without a smile.

"Do you still —" She hesitated, anxious to find words which would express exactly what she meant, but at the same time avoid wounding him by being muffled in general phrases. "Does your heart still go forth to my cousin?"

He started, but there was not a trace of displeasure on his face. "What an observant little girl you must have been, three years ago!" he explained.

"Yes," she explained, simply, "part of my business is to observe Nature. Father used to say that there was a prime essential for one in my field of work, just as there was one prime essential in his. Mine was Observation. His was Audiences. His were not very large, for Tinsville has only about fifteen hundred in it, and there are six churches, not counting the Stay Outers, so you *had* to di-

vide up the people to go around or to stay out (Stay Outers are those that had belonged to churches before they moved to Tinsville but didn't want to go on with their religion). So father and I worked together; he had his audiences and I observed."

She stopped talking and looked at him in reminder that he had not answered her question. Alfred said, "Yes — it still goes forth."

"I don't wonder," she declared. "I think Cousin Minna is the prettiest woman in all the world; she is just perfectly lovely — and the *sweetest* thing!" Her face glowed with such generous enthusiasm that she was fairly pretty, herself.

"She is!" he cried, his thin cheeks touched with red. "Her loveliness is beyond expression. And she is so good, so kind —"

"She wouldn't hurt an insect!" Richard corroborated. "I remember how bad the ants were that summer I staid on the farm, and everything was set in water; but Cousin Minna wouldn't kill one of 'em. Uncle Zack said he believed Cousin Minna would stand on one foot

in a bowl of water so the ants couldn't get to her, rather than destroy them."

Alfred felt that Minna's father had gone too far in presenting such a picture to the imagination, and only said, as if giving the final word, "She is in every particular altogether adorable."

"I hope," said Richard, heartily, "that yours is a happy attachment."

He uttered a groan half humorous, half real. "O Richard—I beg your pardon, Miss Warding—I'm afraid it'll never be any use. Maybe if we hadn't always known each other and lived so near. . . . Maybe if I could be different—I'm so stupid in company, so dull and awkward—such a wretched companion for that gay, care-free angel! I try to think of something to say that'll be worth her hearing, and in the meantime somebody else has poured a bushel of words into her ear. I can't offer chaff to a girl like Minna, little inane commonplaces seem sacrilege when her glorious brown eyes, all full of heavenly light, are looking into mine. There's an air about her, like meadow-

air before the sun is up — it makes me want to bare my head and stand motionless and just breathe in the fragrance; yet the difference is great — one feels his right to the meadow-air with all its cooling dews and early bird-songs — but I'll never have a right to Minna, I'm so different, so commonplace — I feel so heavily conscious that I'm — that I'm a — a *man*."

"This is deep," Richard said. "I'm not old enough to understand. As far as I have got, I think it's perfectly splendid to be a man — if I were a man, only the world would be big enough to hold me — being a woman, Tinsville is big enough for me. Oh, there's that great cottonwood-tree I just loved, three years ago, the only tree in sight — nothing else but fields of corn and this road. I published a poem about that tree last year. Would you like for me to tell you the sentiment?"

"Thank you; by all means."

"The first stanza described the tree. I made you hear its leaves crinkling in the breeze like the sound of a little waterfall. Then I

said, 'There it stands with its shade on the thick grass, laughing all day and night, most of the time with not a soul to look at it. Sometimes a bird comes, but more often not' (it was all in rhyme). 'And yet'—I said—'if I should go back there, twenty years hence, the same tree with the same rippling laughter and the same cool shade would be waiting for me. If it is my lot to stand alone'—that was the last stanza—'with no friends to share my days and nights, perhaps not even the birds to sing for me, will *I* be as brave as that tree, always rippling out my happy music, always keeping my shade ready for some weary traveler?' That was all. It stopped with a question because I don't know. But I hope the answer is '*You will!*' "

"I'm sure it is! Minna's automobile was ditched in front of the Palmer farm; we'll go by and find if Jack has righted it."

"Is he as fat as ever?"

"He's very fat," Alfred replied briefly, not caring to discuss his rival. "But—he's engaged, now."

“ Oh, oh ! ” Richard exclaimed in consternation. “ To Cousin Minna ? ”

There had been too much reason for this conclusion, to permit Alfred the relief of laughter. “ No, Miss Warding, to Juanita Smith.”

“ Juanita Smith ! But she is so very little, and Mr. Jack is so very big — and fat. And Juanita was so still and dissatisfied ; and Mr. Jack was so — noisy and knocking-down-things.”

“ Please don’t try to dissatisfy Jack with Juanita ! ” said Alfred, drily. “ Ah — there they are.”

A turn in the road spread out the scene before them like a picture flooded with sunshine. Five men were toiling with the automobile while a sixth, with his back on the ground, was studying its lower parts. In the Palmer yard which rose directly from the road in a gentle ascent, Jack Palmer and Minna Flood were seated in chairs on a grassy knoll whence they could watch operations and at the same time keep cool. Minna’s lace fan looked absurdly

incongruous as wielded by the young giant, but in spite of much flesh, his dainty shirtwaist, his scrupulously neat collar and tie, and his jealous avoidance of unnecessary forms of exertion, saved him from any suggestion of coarseness.

“They see us!” exclaimed Richard excitedly.

As she spoke, Jack started to rise, then sank back as if unequal to the effort. He lazily waved his handkerchief, turned to Minna, and said something that made her laugh.

Richard remarked gravely, “Miss Juanita should be there.”

CHAPTER III

THE ENGAGEMENT BROKEN

SEVERAL weeks had passed since the misadventure of Minna's automobile before Minna decided to combine a cool, fragrant afternoon in early July with a dainty new pink dress, by going fishing. She had done everything since her return from college but fish — given house-parties, gone to house-parties, entertained, been entertained, driven to town in her automobile — Jack did not like to drive — to the club-dances, taken select parties to the city, thirty miles away, to attend the lightest of light operas — Jack did not care for anything heavy. Of course there were other people besides Jack Palmer. But these others — rather unimportant people, such as Juanita Smith, Alfred Montgomery and the like — shaped their wishes after Jack's; for if Jack did not want to do a thing, he wouldn't do it.

Having done everything else, Minna now went in search of fishing-rods wondering rather ruefully what she would do after she had fished. She might spend a week or two with a school-mate in Wyoming or with another at Palm Beach, for it distressed her to witness how hard her mother worked. As long as she stayed on the farm, she would have to see that. It was hard to induce a cook and housemaid to stay three miles from Pendleton, so a good deal of the housework fell upon her mother who was not very strong. But that was not the worst; Minna was used to that. It was the dresses; her dresses. It was absolutely necessary for her to be decently dressed; she did all she could to help — made trips to the city to buy the goods, consulted patterns and made artistic selections; but after she had taken any amount of trouble, the goods still had to be stitched together. Hired dressmakers spent weeks at a time in the big, cool sitting-room where the elms softened the glare of the windows; but her mother was obliged to oversee, even to help.

However, there was no use to bother about

it, this afternoon; the new pink dress was only a plain, home-affair, nothing that she could dream of wearing to town, or receive in — it was for the farm, and would go better with fishing than with anything else. Elaborate costumes would be out of place at the branch, and yet if any one did happen to find her there, a new pink dress would not prove discreditable. Jack would see at a glance that it was very plain but he would find her face and neck set off to a certain advantage.

The fishing-rods used to be kept in the tool-house and thither Minna picked her dainty way, her care-free song mingling with the hammering of carpenters which resounded from the new room being finished over the old dining-room. That was to be Minna's library and there she would keep all those beautiful gift-books into whose mouths she never looked.

Zack Flood stood under the ladder overseeing his carpenters just as Mrs. Flood was overseeing her dressmakers, and Minna went out of her way to pat his arm. "Dear Father," she said, breaking off her song, "you are so

good to me." Then she tripped to the tool-house where she found her young cousin, pen in hand. Richard, at the interruption, looked up from her desk with an agonized expression as if her brain were in labor to give birth to a great thought.

"*Do* come on, dear," cried Minna, breezily, as she took down the dusty rods and daintily brushed them, "I'm going fishing and you must go, too. What a little hermit! This stuffy old place."

"Cousin Minna, I haven't time to go." Richard looked despairingly about the uncarpeted room with its long knife-hacked workbench, its tools on shelves along the board walls, and the loose planks laid across the rafters. The little desk stood at the low wide window opposite the workbench while at its other side her boxes of books stood on end to form a partition. True, she could look over them at the rest of the room, and when feeling the need of company, she did so; otherwise it was easy to imagine herself securely isolated.

Minna, however, came around the rampart

as if it did not exist. "You are not going to stay in this smelly old toolhouse while I'm enjoying the breezes down at the branch. Come, dear, don't be an old maid!"

The other rose with a sigh. Whenever Minna made up her mind to make Richard happy, there was no use to resist. The girl snatched up her tablet and pencil, and followed down across the pasture to the little stream that traversed a lower corner of the Flood estate.

"We have forgotten to bring any bait," observed Minna, cheerfully, as they stopped at the spring, "but maybe a grasshopper will hop this way." They sat down near the margin of the stream where shade and thick bluegrass conspired for the safety of the fish. Minna looked demurely at her cousin from under her charming headdress which was sunbonnet enough to protect her complexion, and lace enough to refine utility. "Richard, you are just dying to scribble, I know. Well, I'll wander down the branch — there used to be a hole where the fish always bite; I'll leave you a rod. I'm tired of this place, already. If you catch

anything, call, and if I catch anything I'll call — I'll stay within sound of your voice."

Richard watched the lithe figure as it passed gracefully to the summit of a ridge running slantwise from the stream. For a few moments it was sharply defined against the luminous sky though itself almost blackened by overhanging boughs of forest trees. One moment the dress, gracefully held back from exquisitely shaped feet and ankles, was somber of hue; the next, as the sun flooded the shadow-gap, it was vivid pink set in gold. Whether Minna's face was radiant in the light or softened in the shade, it was the prettiest thing in all that landscape. After it had disappeared — for on the farther side of the ridge, Minna was safe from observation — Richard sat very still, pencil in hand, looking at the shadow-leaves fluttering in the clear stream, listening to the many silken voices as tiny waterfalls answered each other from pebbly ledges, and thinking all the time of her cousin's beauty. Then she tried to get it into a poem but it was impossible to build one large enough to hold

anything so supreme. After many strivings, she wrote with an impassioned hand:

“ Oh, flowers of all the world, and every southern breeze

And every sparkle of the brook, whispers of all the trees —”

She read it over several times with long intervals between the readings. After the last time she took off her spectacles, and exclaimed in despair, “ Words! That is all.”

Hearing footsteps in the long grass she turned swiftly, at the same time thrusting her tablet under her skirt with the instinct of the miser who begrudges a sight of his gold to his dearest friend.

“ What is the matter, Miss Warding? ” asked Alfred Montgomery anxiously, as he hurried forward. “ You are sitting in the burning sun, and you look so troubled.”

Richard started up as if a spring had been touched to bring her back to real life. “ I was in the shade when I sat down, but that must have been a good while ago. Thought and

Time are not very good friends, and in writing they often forget each other." She looked at him earnestly, and finding his face as sympathetic and respectful as usual, confided, "I was trying to write a poem to describe Cousin Minna. I thought of all the beautiful things of Nature, but when I read what I'd written, there wasn't in it even so much as one of Cousin Minna's little fingers."

"May I read it? I'm very much interested in your subject. Are there just these two lines?"

"There are not many lines," Richard admitted. "I tried to boil down my thoughts and catch the grains of sugar. I thought of the gorgeous flowers of California, and the dainty blossoms on the mountain-side, and the early violets in the woods, and the crocuses in the snow. And then I tried to bunch 'em, and just said, 'Flowers of all the world.' I pursued the same method with 'breeze' which I was presently to rhyme with 'trees.' I thought of all the sweet, soft summer-breezes that seem to lie on your brow when the ther-

mometer is near a hundred, and the horses can't stand still because the flies annoy them every minute. I remembered one day when father was preaching, so thin and tired and weak, and the church was oh, so hot and close and still, and everybody wished it was over—and all of a sudden a little breeze that smelt like mignonettes came right down the aisle and stopped on father's face and played with his gray hair and freshened his eyes and made him seem strong and young. I'll never forget that breeze. I tried to put it in this poem when I said 'And every southern breeze.' But you can see, it isn't in the poem. It wouldn't come out of my heart. If I only knew how to get on paper what's in my heart!"

"That comes with long practice," Alfred answered, gently.

"Yes, but won't one's heart be worn out by practicing?"

There was such an earnest fire in her eyes, such a pathetic wistfulness about her tremulous lips that it was impossible for him to regard her as a mere girl of immature age; doubtless

it was because he had always treated her as a woman that he had gained her unreserved confidence, for certainly she had never discussed her inner thoughts thus simply with anybody else.

Not being able to answer her question because it was beyond his experience, he inquired for the subject of her poem; at the house, they had told him that Minna was fishing. Alfred was sufficiently interested by Richard's quaint speech and her eloquent face to enjoy her society when there was no hope of doing better. Now, he entertained such a hope. He had ridden over from his father's farm to visit Minna informally and, if possible, present to her consideration the thought that she might possibly, in her spendthrift goodness, have been bestowing rather too many favors upon Jack Palmer. Alfred did not know if he would find courage to act thus chivalrously for Juanita Smith's sake, and, so far as that was concerned, for Jack's sake, and Minna's own irreproachable good name. The difficulty was that Minna might imagine Alfred was speaking for his own

sake. On learning that Minna and Richard were fishing "down at the branch," fortune seemed to smile. Indeed, fortune had smiled; but Alfred, so far from taking warning, was eager to follow Richard's direction and seek Minna on the other side of the slanting ridge.

In the meantime, Minna had not been sitting idly upon the bank with a rod in her hand and her eyes on the cork; for being made the subject of a poem is not the same as posing for one's picture. Secured by the ridge from Richard's thoughtful and adoring eyes, and comforted by the conviction that Richard would scribble in her own grassy spot till called home, Minna was sensible of the buoyant joy of freedom rather enhanced than otherwise by the sudden appearance — on her side of the ridge — of Jack Palmer.

Why he should have come just then and just there, Minna could not imagine. It is true that, the night before, having nothing else to say, and not supposing he was listening, she had remarked that on the next afternoon she believed she would fish, as it seemed a pity to let

the summer pass away without one exploration into the adventures of childhood. It was said in jest, and Jack had taken it in earnest; that is what so amused Minna, now. He had actually believed she intended to fish, and to fish at this hole where he and she had fished years and years before Juanita Smith. Well, here he was — she must try to make the best of it. So while Richard was culling her flowers of memory and distilling all the breezes of the Southland into one composite breeze to rhyme with her "trees," Minna and Jack talked in low, languid undertones like the muttering of far-distant thunder, occasionally pierced by a sudden flash of laughter.

Among other things they talked of Richard. Jack, lying gracefully at ease, cheek on palm and elbow cushioned on the thick grass with Minna's sunbonnet dangling from his disengaged hand, looked up into Minna's face with restful enjoyment. Seated opposite with hands folded on her lap and the right foot extended far enough beyond the left knee to show that

the stocking matched the dress, Minna looked at him with the calmness that comes only from knowing that one's hair, one's dress, one's stocking are all they should be. There was no possibility of the situation degenerating into mere midsummer dullness, for there was always the farm-house to be watched — one's father and mother never understand when they see their little girl's bonnet in a young man's hand, instead of on her very pretty head.

“— And Richard is just on the other side of that hill,” Minna nodded toward the long ridge and Jack noted how the sunflecks danced on the rhythmic brown hair like scattering gold-dust. The great desire of his heart at that moment was to tell her how beautiful he found her, how inexpressibly dear. Duty to his betrothed steeled his heart and silenced his tongue, but Jack could not steel his heart without letting somebody know it. He sighed deeply, then spoke as if casting his words aside from his real thought:

“ I wonder if she'll stay there? ”

"Oh, yes," Minna answered, comfortably. "She's writing. She'll not move till I call her."

"Writing? What for?"

"Oh — I don't know. She's going to write a book."

"A book!" echoed Jack, in dismay. "Does she *have* to do it?"

Minna laughed. "She thinks she does. Just fancy — when I asked her to come with me, fishing, she said she *hadn't time!*"

Jack whistled. "I wish I could give her some of mine. I am bored to death all day long except what time I am with —" He grabbed up a handful of grass and threw it into Minna's lap.

It seemed to her that there was a certain tension in the atmosphere — Jack looked in earnest about something. She murmured, "Richard is such a queer little thing! She is a darling, but so *queer*. She likes to work, don't you know, and we can't keep her from doing things about the house — it's awfully hard to keep enough servants — and when she

sees mother at last seated for the morning — it's awfully long before you can get mother to sit down, she just loves to potter about the house — What was I saying? ”

“ Oh, Minna, it doesn't matter what you say, just keep your voice moving, do! ” Jack closed his eyes as if to be lulled to sleep.

“ You ridiculous boy! You are just like you used to be.”

“ I am, Minna, *just* like I used to be — about *everything*.”

“ Well, I don't want to talk about you, but about Richard. Then when she can't find a room to straighten, or vegetables to gather, or berries to stem, she runs off to the toolhouse and writes on her book. I never can get her to come into the parlor when I have company unless I coax and coax till I believe my hair is getting gray; do you see any gray hairs? ”

“ I see only the most high-class, up-to-date rigging-out of what — in its natural state — is surely the prettiest — ”

“ And then, when I *do* get her into the parlor, there she sits as dumb as — as anything,

and 'yes,' and 'no' is all she will say though I know she's just *full* of thoughts. Do you know, it's the same way when she and I are alone together! I can no more think of anything to say to Richard than if she was — was a — a — oh, you know what I mean."

"Yes, yes, Minna, don't try so hard, it's too hot. Dicky is just a joke to me, but you take her seriously. Laugh and forget her. That's the best way."

"You ought to know."

"Now, Minna, I never laughed about you —"

"Jack, I wasn't thinking of myself — how could you say that!"

"I can say a good deal worse than that."

"I don't care. In a few days I'm going away where people can't say 'a good deal worse' to me. It'll either be Palm Beach or Wyoming. I can't fish all the time, especially when my company is too lazy to catch me just one tiny little grasshopper."

Jack sat up suddenly. "Do you mean that, Minna?"

She was somewhat startled by his abruptness.

"Are you really thinking of going away?"

"I *am* going away. I've done everything else."

He rose and brushed the grass-seeds from his perfectly-kept trousers. In a community of hard-working farmers, such trousers were by no means to be seen every day, nor such an immaculate white shirtwaist — a shirtwaist of fairy whiteness intensified by a narrow blue tie, hiding none of its light under the bushel of coat-and-vest. He reached down his hand to help her to her feet.

"But it's so pleasant down here," objected Minna.

"People don't sit on the ground when they say what I want to say to you," replied Jack, authoritatively. "Stand up." She let him lift her from the grass, but her face had suddenly grown troubled and the peach blossoms deepened in her cheeks.

"I want to know, now," he said, with some severity, "if you are really going away from Pendleton?"

Piqued by his masterful attitude she returned firmly, "I — really — *am*."

"Then I want to say that I can't stand this any longer; that it's impossible to keep this up, and that — and that what you know very well is the truth, and the only truth in the world for me and — and I'm not going to stand it!"

He was so tremendously in earnest, so wonderfully unlike the apathetic Jack she had so long admired that she found his phrases touched by divine eloquence. This tumultuous vitality was on her account; by the power of her words, her smiles, her quick brown looks, her pink dress, her pink slippers — how could she tell? — the old days were come back.

"But you can't —" she stammered, her face deep-stained with crimson. "It — you know — it can't be —"

"It can be. Minna, it *is*." He came quickly to her. "Minna, it is. And what's more, you know it. And you know in your heart that it couldn't ever be any other way — that anything else is simply impossible. That's all. That settles it. When I try to think of

anything else, I find that anything else is impossible. And so there's no use trying to play hide-and-seek with the truth. Just the instant you said you were going far away, and I saw you meant it, something snapped in my heart. It was the last bond, that's what it was, the last raveling of the tie that ever chained me up to anything else." He put his arm about her.

She did not try to draw away, but she began to sob pathetically.

"You love me, Minna; what's the use of anything else."

"But, O Jack — *she!*"

"Yes, I know, but it can't be helped. I've always loved you and you know it. When you went away I was so lonesome and she — but there's no good talking about it. Don't cry, Minna."

"— And I know poor father and mother will think . . ."

"Just rest your head here, darling, and have it out. I suppose nobody can be happy without walking over a lot of hearts. But we've *got* to do our duty and our duty is to ourselves.

Your father and mother have had their life and now you must have yours."

"But *she!*" sobbed Minna. "Oh, but she hasn't had her life. And if she loves you, Jack, like — like I think she does —"

"No, no, no, no, Minna, that isn't what you started to say."

"Well, then, like *I* do . . ."

He covered her face with kisses.

"We mustn't be too happy," she whispered. He kissed her lips.

"It seems so sad," she murmured, with closed eyes. Then she put her arms about his neck — "But, oh, Jack, I want you so — ever since I heard of your engagement — and when I came home, the very second I saw you I knew everything I'd been telling myself was no use because — I want you so!"

A few minutes later there came to them a far-away voice from beyond the ridge — "O Cousin Minna! O Cousin Minna!"

"It's Richard!" exclaimed Minna, breaking from his embrace. "That's to signal if she catches anything."

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The voice came again: "Cousin Minna! Mr. Montgomery is here! O Cousin Min-NA! Mr. Montgomery is HERE!"

"So *that's* what she's caught!" ejaculated the young man in deep disgust.

"What shall I do!" Minna clasped her hands in despair and raised her deeply flushed face to her companion.

"If that blush won't come off, Minna, you might as well announce your engagement."

"But I can't see him — I can't see *anybody*, but especially Alfred. Jack, he is *such* a bore — he tires me *to death* talking about *Things* — What *shall* I do!"

"Come quick — I want to hide as much as you do; I'm not supposed to be on this farm and your father as good as said, this morning, that he could live without me. Down through this grove!" They fled among the maple trees. Despite his flesh, he was as active on his feet as his companion, but unfortunately he began to laugh.

"You are taking me toward the house," Minna panted reproachfully.

“Never mind — we’ll slip up to the rear of the toolhouse and in that way, they can’t see us from the house. Listen at that!”

It was Richard’s voice — “O Minna! Mr. Montgomery —”

Jack shook with suppressed laughter and dried his eyes with his handkerchief. “If she don’t stop, she’ll be the death of me,” he gasped, holding the handkerchief over his mouth.

“Jack. How can you! — there’s *nothing* to laugh about. Alfred will stay two hours at the very least. I shall just *die* if he finds me.”

“He’ll not find you. We’ll sneak under the toolhouse — I guess the ice is still kept under there, isn’t it? And the outside-door will let us in right under the floor of the toolhouse. My, how hot it is! I can’t think of a nicer spot on earth or under it, than that icehouse. Now, dodge behind this bush.”

“But you’ll get sawdust all over your clothes — you’ll be ruined.”

“I’ll be cool, at any rate.” They had reached the upper end of the pasture and now

Richard and Alfred could be seen, climbing the ridge. "Hold your head lower, sweetheart, just a little farther and we'll be safe behind the woodpile. I reckon there never was such a test of love as I'm going to give you. Whoever heard of a girl putting her lover on ice to find out if his heart was true?"

From a quarter of a mile away came a thin, insistent call.

It was Richard's voice — "O Minna! Mr. Montgomery is HERE!"

Jack exploded. "O Lord, what shall I do!" he gasped, in convulsions. "You go ahead and open the door — that girl will be the death of me!"

CHAPTER IV

THIN ICE

IT was some time after Jack Palmer and Minna Flood sought refuge in the ice-cellar under the toolhouse floor, before Richard and Alfred opened the door of the girl's "study-room." They had searched the premises for her missing cousin, and Mr. Flood's certainty that she had not come to the house confirmed their conclusion that she had slipped away to a neighbor's. The nearest neighbor lived half a mile away, but Richard did not think half a mile too far for Minna, when Alfred was the only alternative. Alfred himself began to understand conditions better than ever before; and although there were such books in the boxes facing the window as at other times would have made his eyes brighten either with the smile of an old acquaintance, or with the eagerness of one desiring an intro-

duction, he now looked at everything with impartial indifference.

"Miss Warding," he said abruptly, as he perched upon one of the boxes, "I am thoroughly discouraged."

Richard seated herself at her desk, took off her spectacles, and looked at him with a slight nod.

"As friend to friend," he persisted, "don't you believe that Minna ran off to hide when you called out that I was here? Don't you believe I am the cause of her being driven away from her own farm? And don't you think that as soon as I am seen crossing the hill on the west, Minna will reappear from some secret retreat? I want you to answer me as friend to friend, for I'll not deny that I place great importance on what you may say."

Richard answered with the solemnity of a very old and very stilted lady, as if speaking out of the pages of a last century's romance: "I cannot always speak freely as friend to friend when it is concerning one in whose relationship I stand as cousin to cousin."

Alfred looked at her with parted lips, making a painful effort to concentrate his mind upon her complicated phrasing. Then he said, bitterly, "I'm right — she runs away from me. She always avoids me when possible. And yet, I can't give her up — I'm always thinking maybe I've drawn my conclusions too hastily. I ask myself, is it possible that she might care for me, even if she doesn't now; and then I wonder if she does care — just a little, you know — and if it's timidity that causes her to avoid me. Heaven knows there's no reason why she should care for me, except the fact that I've always loved her — that I adore her — I can't tell you how I idolize that girl — but I could tell you a thousand times easier than I could tell *her*. Oh, Richard — let me call you Richard — I can't tell her, because she is so beautiful and good and ethereal — and I am so unworthy! If I knew she cared for me, it would almost be my duty to tell her *don't* — only I couldn't do that, for I'd be the happiest man on earth — O Richard! the man that Minna loves — how *would* he feel!"

"Have you revealed your affection?" Richard inquired.

"Revealed it! I couldn't any more conceal it than I could hide the rising sun by trying to throw my coat over it. It's revealed, Richard. But not in words. Minna has just come home from college and all the world is before her, she has beauty — oh! that melting charm of the lips — but I feel that I shouldn't speak of them — and she has wealth and education. But *I!* Richard, I'm nothing. My health has never been good — I can't work on the farm — never could. All I'm fit for is to go to college. Last year was my first at Harvard and I hope to rest enough this summer to go back. I can't do a man's work — if I could go out and plow under the burning sun from morning till night, and be strong to get up the next morning to go at it again, I'd feel independent. I don't mean to complain, but you see I can't offer what little there is of me to a girl like Minna. If my father were wealthy it would be different, but he is barely able to keep me at college. There will be three more years before

I can practice — I'm to go into a cousin's law-office when I've graduated. But will Minna stay single all that time? ”

“No,” said Richard, “I do not think it.”

“She won't!” Alfred groaned. “I wonder why it is that what we want most is in our reach only while our hands are tied behind our backs? ”

“I don't understand it, either,” said Richard.

“Sometimes I am tortured by this: I've explained why I can't tell Minna of my love; but suppose, after all that she *does* care for me — I mean *just* a little — is it fair to her for me to keep silent? ”

“I wouldn't be tortured over that,” Richard counseled him. “I would go on and get my education and begin practicing my law, and then, if Minna has married somebody else —”

“Don't finish; I can't think about that. You see, my love for Minna is my life — it's simply my life. It's been, ever since I can remember. Jack Palmer and I used to fight about her when we were in the infant class.

If she marries somebody else I'll — I'll just stop; you see, there'd be no place left to reach; there wouldn't be any direction."

"Love is an awful responsibility," Richard commented. "I think it far better to make up your mind while young never to marry. I shall not be in love. I will have my life-work." She picked up some loose sheets from the desk. "Here is what I say about it; shall I read you the program of my lifework? It is a long prologue." Suddenly she gave a start. "Did you hear that — listen! It sounded like a muffled groan."

"I thought I heard a groan — it was the wind, of course. Richard, forgive me, but I can't fasten my mind upon any reading. I'm going to tell you why I came over this afternoon. Then I want your advice. It may sound worse than it is but — Richard, do you think Minna has *any* faults?"

"As cousin to cousin —"

"You needn't answer. But there is some talk — faint whispers — that — that Minna and Jack . . . you see, he is engaged, and it's

not fair to Juanita Smith . . . but they say Minna and Jack —” He broke off in perplexity.

“They have always been friends,” Richard explained. “When I visited here, three years ago, they were chums.”

“But . . . Richard, would you be willing to hint to Minna that she and Jack . . . I think she’d take it better from you than from me.”

“He calls me ‘Dick’!” exclaimed Richard, severely. “He is so familiar!”

“He could never have been worthy of Minna,” cried Alfred, “Juanita Smith, or no Juanita Smith. The idea of his setting his eyes on that dainty, spiritual, sensitive, illuminated —”

“He is fat,” Richard added, “positively fat. And so lazy that it nearly kills him to open the gate.”

“I admit,” pursued Alfred, “that he is handsome in his way. I believe anybody seeing him for the first time would call him remarkably handsome. And he’s good-natured, and all that. *But!* Why, you see, it’s ridic-

ulous for a fellow like that — he never would stay at school, he doesn't know anything, and the worst is, he doesn't know that he doesn't know anything — worth while. He doesn't know what *is* worth while. How could he ennoble Minna's life when he has no ambition? ”

“ But he is already engaged, Mr. Montgomery.”

“ I know he is already engaged, *but!* And don't you think you could give her a nice, quiet, friendly little hint? Just as cousin to cousin! ”

“ He is so physical! ” exclaimed Richard. “ He weighs nearly two hundred. And he calls me ‘ Dick. ’ I have rebuked him for it although I was afraid of hurting his feelings. I needn't have been afraid of *that*. He laughed.”

“ — Just a gentle, cautious little hint, Richard, don't you think you might? ”

“ I can't think it necessary. I don't believe Cousin Minna could possibly admire as fat a man as that. He is *too* fat. They have happened to get together at parties because both know the same old songs while Miss Juanita

can't sing. Nor I; but I write. Miss Juanita does nothing. No, Mr. Montgomery, Cousin Minna would have a right to feel hurt if she thought I imagined that she could admire a man so — so big and — and — and different from our kind of people. You asked me if Cousin Minna has any faults. She may have, but I don't know what they are — she is perfectly splendid. You have spoken of her in high terms, but they are not too high." Richard exclaimed with restrained passion while her face glowed, "She is just the *sweetest* thing in all the wide world."

Alfred could have embraced her, but for the awe inspired by her spectacles. He felt ashamed of his vague suspicions regarding Jack, but when he left the toolhouse his heart was lighter than it had been for weeks.

Richard, left alone, sat for some time motionless, her hands clasped upon the desk, thinking about Alfred. When footsteps roused her, she reached for the pen to resume work upon her book; but she was destined to another interruption — Zack Flood and his

wife came in, talking briskly and looking about them at each step, for Minna was still missing.

Of course they paid no attention to such child's play as Richard's scribbling. Mrs. Flood perched upon the box of books recently vacated by Alfred, and the farmer leaned against the open door, while they continued their conversation as if it didn't matter whether Richard listened or not. In fact, Mrs. Flood had found a few moments of leisure, and fancying that her niece must be lonesome if alone, had brought her husband thither meaning to cheer up Richard by their mere presence.

Richard, finding her pen useless, laid it down mournfully and smiled at her aunt and uncle with deceitful cheerfulness. Mrs. Flood looked strangely girlish as she swung her foot to and fro, her face lighted up in great animation, her eyes eloquent. For the moment, care and labor cast its net of tiny lines off her countenance and her forty-eight years seemed cut in two. Zack Flood was not a man to melt back to boyhood in the heat of enthusiasm. He was forty-nine, and forty-nine is what he

looked; not a gloomy, complaining, sport-spoiling forty-nine, but for all that, a fifty-less-one that realizes there is to be no more foolishness in dealing with Father Time.

“— And Minna says,” continued Mrs. Flood, “that our telephone simply drives her wild. It’s always ringing, though I hadn’t noticed it till she came home. She counts every time whether it’s for us or not. We must get off the party-line.”

“Then I’ll have to pay the expenses of a whole half-mile’s connection.”

“Yes, it’s bothersome and expensive, but Minna’s nerves are in a frightful state; I’m glad her schooling is ended, for she has worn herself out with her studies. And Minna says, if we just had electric lights! Dear, don’t you think we could —”

“What! Three miles from Pendleton —”

“But Minna says she knows girls at college whose fathers have ranches and they put in their own plant. And if you had an artesian well and a windmill we could have our own waterworks, too. You can’t imagine how sen-

sitive Minna is to the smell of coal oil. Every year she has spent nine months where there are electric lights and bathrooms — and then to come home and find no bath and only coal oil — it's enough to make her dissatisfied — although nobody is more contented or loves her home more than Minna."

"I reckon," remarked Zack, "that she's out, now, hiding from the coal oil smell." He spoke with tolerant amusement, but any amusement at the expense of their daughter was heresy in Mrs. Flood's eyes.

"Sometimes, Zack, you speak as if you don't care for higher things (Minna has noticed it, too), but I'm sure you do."

"The trouble is, Minnie, that higher things all come at higher prices. You know I didn't make a cent out of my cattle last year, and from the way this season has set in, there'll not be a half crop of corn. Minna's boarding-school made a big hole in our reserves —"

"I certainly do hope, Zack, that you don't regret the education we have given our daughter!"

"Of course not. But now that we've finished her at school, I don't want her to finish us at home."

"I can't imagine what you mean. Minna says —"

"I mean that a private electric-plant and a private waterworks-system would seriously handicap me, honey."

"But Minna says that we have too large a farm, anyway. It's too big for you to get the best results; if you sold North Acres you could concentrate better on the five hundred acres that would be left; and for what North Acres brought, you could get rid of this coal oil. *Nobody* has coal oil in their houses, nowadays; and whenever Minna gives a house-party, I know she's ashamed of the lamps. We've spared no expense in ornamental shades, but there is the coal oil smell."

"Possibly, honey, next year —"

"But we are living in this year, Zack, *this* is the time of Minna's youth. She'll never have her youth again. Even if you're unwilling to sell North Acres, Minna says *all* the

girls' fathers carry mortgages on their ranches, they do it *on purpose*, so they will have capital to invest in their business; it *pays* 'em to be in debt, and if they were out of it, they'd get in directly for their own interests."

"I don't see how an electric-and-waterworks investment would pay me, honey."

"Wouldn't it pay you to see your daughter happy? Is *everything* to be measured in dollars and cents? People don't do everything because there's *money* in it!"

"Well — I'll think it over. Richard, I want to ask you a question: have you seen Jack Palmer, to-day?"

Startled at being thus abruptly included in the conversation, Richard looked at him, slightly pale, wondering if he had in any manner been advised of the silly rumors then current. "No, sir — I haven't seen anyone to-day except Mr. Montgomery."

Zack Flood's face brightened. "There's a fine young fellow," he declared. "Pity he isn't stronger — nobody will ever know what a giant will he has. Any other man in his place

would have given up long ago. He started out with his own mother's weaknesses and he took all his step-mother's diseases as fast as they developed. Every time he gets up he's down with the typhoid fever or the diphtheria."

"Zack! I'm ashamed of you — I like Alfred Montgomery real well, and if he's dull, as Minna says, can he help that?"

"And *I* like him," the farmer declared, with unmistakable heartiness. "A fellow can be hounded by ill-luck till it's actually funny to others; but it's no joke to Alfred. How he has the grit to go ahead with his education is a mystery. It's like making himself smart and fit for his winding-sheet. I never hear of him being up and about but I look for him to be down."

Richard opened her eyes very wide. "I have talked to Mr. Montgomery a good deal," she said, "and he never once told he had been sick."

"He gets enough out of it without talking," Zack explained. Then he added, gravely enough, "I doubt if he'll live to graduate."

He's got nothing but his will to keep him afloat, and if it springs a leak, he'll go under."

"O Uncle Zack!" cried Richard, in distress. "But what's the matter?"

"Richard, did he ever tell you how he saved Minna's life?"

"No, never. Oh, *did* he, though? And not one word did he breathe of it!"

"That's because he's Alfred Montgomery. And did Minna tell you about it, and how he lost what health he had because of his exposure during a long ride in dripping clothes and then — pneumonia?"

"No-o-o."

"That's Minna," remarked Zack, good-humoredly.

"Now, Zack," cried his wife, flushing, "Minna has been home only a few weeks and couldn't possibly have time to think of everything to tell Richard. Why, I haven't told her, myself; and you haven't."

"I must go back to those carpenters," declared Zack, inclining his ear. "Not a hammer astir! Well, Richard, I'll say this while

we're on the subject — that if you ever need to trust mortal man with a secret, no matter how sacred, just you go to Alfred Montgomery; and if he's still alive you'll find a man to depend on! So long!"

"Wait, I'm coming," cried Mrs. Flood, still looking as fresh as a girl, but climbing down from the box with the caution of maturity. "I want to show you just where the wires could go into the house without touching a single tree. Richard, hadn't you better come to the house? — we hate to leave you all alone where you can't even hear our voices."

But Richard was content to remain. She was thinking, thinking, thinking — and every one of her thoughts were connected with Alfred Montgomery. She had been left alone a long time, trying to imagine how Alfred had rescued Minna to the loss of his health, when she was startled in a manner to cause her heart to stop beating. Immediately under the floor, as it seemed under her very feet, a hoarse, deep-mouthed voice reverberated:

"Speaking of Miss Richard Warding —"

She sprang to her feet, terrified.

The fearful voice continued; its words were those of human speech, but its tones were those of a wild lion: "Did you ever notice how thin and scrawny she is? She is thin; too thin. She is lean — she is too lean for 'our kind of people.'"

Then came a smothered giggle.

"She is not physical," resumed the deep voice. "She weighs fifty-seven and a few ounces. Do not call her Dick, lest you be rebuked!"

CHAPTER V

THE PROMISE

WHEN Minna opened the toolhouse door and went in, Jack Palmer had made good his escape. At first she thought the room deserted, but a closer inspection revealed a little huddled figure at the window, face buried in arms, body quivering with sobs. Minna had opened the door with the look of one deeply offended, and her expression was unaltered at what she considered a manifestation of futile anger.

“It’s no more than you deserve,” she said, coldly. “He had to hear your opinion of him, which unfortunately is not flattering, and now you know what he thinks of *you*.” She stood with her hand on the closed door; it was evident that she had come for a brief word, and as soon as she could master her indignation she would speak and go. Minna felt grievously

wronged. Had Richard and Alfred trapped her in the cellar, forcing her to hear their condemnation of Jack, her sense of injury would have been no greater. It seemed to her that this little girl, always so silent, so meek, so wrapped up in literary ambitions, had proved herself a spy.

Richard said nothing — only wept.

Minna looked at her, unsympathetically. What right had a girl who had been given this home because she had no other, a girl received as much on the ground of charity as on that of family-duty, a girl with no prospects but such as she might expect as a favor from her uncle — what right had this Richard Warding to any opinion except such as might be permitted by the family? It was preposterous that she should think about Jack at all, and that she should think ill, was the height of ingratitude. And what a wretched temper she must have, to be enraged by Jack's ironic utterances!

At last Minna said, "I am in a hurry, Richard; can you give me your attention a moment? I am sorry you are so angry."

Richard raised her disheveled head. "Yes, I'm listening," she said, in a muffled voice.

"It's important for you to understand," remarked Minna, critically examining her, "and I'm afraid you're too angry to pay attention."

"Oh, Cousin Minna!" cried Richard, somewhat wildly, "angry? *I?* No!"

"Then what are you crying about? Are you hurt?"

"Yes, oh, I am hurt here —" Richard struck at her heart.

"After all, Richard, he said nothing except that you're thin."

"It's you, Minna — it's *you!* And it makes me feel so queer, as if everything was slipping away. . . . I don't know what's left — I don't know *what's* left —" Down went the flushed face in the quivering arms, leaving Minna to stare in blank amazement.

"I can't imagine what you mean —"

"When I lost father, the world seemed empty — and then I found you." Richard extended her arms before her. "But it is like

this — emptiness!” She dropped her arms. “I guess you haven’t known how I’ve worshiped the very ground under your feet. I didn’t want to trouble you with it, just kept it in my heart, and loved it — my feeling. It was company for me. That’s why I can’t help crying, but it’s like when father died, I’d like to be all alone — not to bother others. Won’t you please let it be that way, Cousin Minna? And when you see me again, I’ll be all right.”

“If you mean that you want me to go, you’ll be satisfied. Yes, I’ll leave you alone as much as you please. I just wanted to caution you to say nothing about Jack’s having been on the farm, because father and mother wouldn’t understand and — and it’s much better for all concerned.”

“I’ll not breathe one word unless they ask me.”

“Well, if they *do* ask, you needn’t tell. And you mustn’t!”

“I won’t if I can help it.”

“People can always help it if they want to. I’m not asking you to tell a story, that wouldn’t

be right. But you can make them think in the negative without saying 'no.' "

"If they ask me if he was here, I'll have to say 'yes.' "

"Richard, I don't believe you would do that — after all the kindness I have shown you! "

"But I would *have* to say 'yes.' "

"Because Jack made fun of you, that's the reason! Because you want your revenge by getting us into trouble." The tears came to Minna's eyes; she felt that she had never been so cruelly used in all her life — and by this interloper! "Richard, if you tell on us, we'll never forgive you. How could you stay in our house knowing that you had made us dislike you? I don't believe it's in your heart to be so cruel."

"Cousin Minna, Uncle Zack has already asked me, so it's not likely he'll ask again."

"But if he does —"

"I'll have to tell him. But it would be strange if he asked me instead of you."

Minna went out, slamming the door sharply. Her little face was hard and set as she sought

her room upstairs, and though the hammering was enough to distract anybody, she told herself she didn't care because all the world had gone wrong, anyway. It was here Zack Flood came to seek her; and the first covert glance at his face gave warning that the serious hour of her life had come.

She had never seen that look on his face, and it made her forget everything else in a sense of fear,—fear of this bronzed farmer who had never waited to meet her wishes half-way, but had run to greet them at the first opening of the door of her fancy. It made her feel miserably strange and small, that look of stern authority, as if there were physical danger to be apprehended. Her lips could not utter a word; her eyes sought in vain to leave the floor.

He shut the door, crossed to the open window and seated himself upon the sill. A sugar-maple which almost touched the house, flecked his shirt with overlapping shadows, occasionally revealing between fringed edges a sudden darting sunbeam like a tongue of flame. When he spoke, the absence of dreaded harshness made

her shiver with relief. Although he had never shown harshness, her expectation of it now seemed so simple, so inevitable, that she had already hardened herself to the attitude of one suffering unmerited reproach.

"Honey," his voice was grave, considerate, "why did you hide from Alf Montgomery?"

Minna raised her head, courageous from the belief that Richard had not "told." "It wasn't the right time of day for a young man to come visiting."

"From what I have just heard—" Minna had never thought of her father as dignified, but his face now wore a look of dignity—"Jack must have felt differently."

Minna flushed. "Who told you that?"

"Nobody, until I forced an answer."

"It was Richard, of course. I think you might have asked me."

He gave her a long look. "Jack knows I don't want him to come here so often. I made that plain enough to him this very morning."

"Father!"

"And, Daughter, you know it, too."

He had scolded her at last, and at the expected injury, she burst into sudden weeping. "I don't know what you have against Jack," sobbing, "I know he thinks a great deal of you."

"If there were nothing else, the fact that he's engaged to Juanita Smith . . ."

She buried her face in her handkerchief. "But you *don't* understand!"

"I dare say Juanita doesn't, either; nor the neighbors; nor your mother either. He must be the smartest fellow in the county not to leave a few clues around to his mystery."

Minna looked up with a flash. "I believe you hate him!"

"Who, *Jack*? I couldn't. He's too no-account. There's nothing in him *to* hate."

Minna raised her head higher. "He is my friend, Father. And as far as *that* is concerned, he's more — he's brighter and more interesting and — and *everything* than any other young man I know of in this part of the country."

"Well, I'll admit there's a pretty poor crop.

But he's no-account. Nobody ever had a finer start; but before his mother died, he'd mortgaged that big farm his father left him for every dollar it would carry. He hasn't a thing on earth yet dresses as if he owned it all. He's too lazy to earn a penny and too extravagant to save one. I like Jack, and if it wasn't too much trouble, I believe he'd do me a good turn; but he's no-account — Minna, he is *no-account*."

Minna's face had grown cold, her voice formal. "You don't understand," she commented, hardly above a whisper.

"The point is simply this, Daughter: Jack must stop coming to my place, and if you meet him elsewhere, you are to have as little to do with him as possible."

The tears came into her eyes. "Father, I never thought you could be cruel to me!"

"I know this is for your good," he rose from the window-ledge as if to leave the room, then turned to her suddenly. "You have hurt me, Minna."

Instantly Minna's kind heart was touched. She ran into his arms, and sobbed upon his neck.

"I know you think it for my good . . . I know you have always been the best father in the world . . . I know you love me as deeply as I love you. . . . You have done everything on earth for me — given me whatever you imagined I'd like to have — and — but — but now this is more than everything else in my life. . . . O Father, what shall I do!"

He stood very still while she clung to him, saying at last, "Can it be? . . ."

"Oh, it is; it's the greatest truth in my life; it's for always, Father, now you know how big a thing it is, because it's for always! I'm glad for you to know, after all. We thought we wouldn't tell for awhile because we knew you'd be bewildered. . . . But you'd *have* to have known, at last, wouldn't you, Father? It's our destiny, it couldn't have been helped, it had to be. And, oh, it has made me happier than I dreamed happiness could be, and — and I am so miserable!"

He placed her in her chair, and drew away, sorrowful but not unkind. "What has to be, Minna?"

"He loves me and I — and I . . . but I couldn't be happy without him. You are my father and you could make him go away from me, but it would break my heart. And his heart would be broken, too, because we have always loved each other since we can first remember, that's why it has to be. Neither of us has ever really cared for anybody else."

"Juanita Smith —"

Minna interposed impatiently. "O Juanita Smith!" It seemed to her that somebody was always referring to that tiresome Juanita Smith. "She was *never* anything to him. Not *really*, you understand."

"Does she know that?"

"He will tell her, of course, he will *have* to tell her, *now*, but he hasn't told her *yet*, because our engagement was — was so sudden. — Father, he has been fighting against me ever since I came back from college, all this time, three weeks and a half — his sense of honor wouldn't *let* him give her up without a terrible struggle. He wanted to be true to her because he'd given his *word*, but it wasn't any use be-

cause, oh, we — why, Father, we were made for each other, nothing else could be possible. Of course he will explain it all to Juanita — he will break *that* off honorably and —”

“There’s no need for him to tell Juanita a word about you, Minna, since this is going no farther. You’ll not see him any more unless by the barest chance.”

“But I can’t live —”

“It’s just because I want you to live, and live happily —”

“But I couldn’t be happy without Jack.”

“Maybe so; but you can be happier without him than with him. I have never been firm with you, dear, because you’ve been the darling of our lives, and all we ask for is to see you happy —”

She started from her chair and held out her arms. “I know you’ve been the sweetest, the dearest father —”

But before she could embrace him, he took her hands in his, and looking steadily in her eyes — “Minna, I must be firm now because I know Jack couldn’t make a good husband; he’s

never made anything of himself, and good husbands are a thousand times harder to make than good farmers. No — don't begin to cry — don't pull away, for you must hear me: I simply do not propose to see all the years your mother and I have devoted to you, going to waste. You can never marry Jack Palmer with our consent; if you marry without it, I can't speak for your mother, but I tell you now, I shall never be reconciled. I don't mean to be unkind — good Lord! isn't my life wrapped up in your welfare? — I'd say all this on my knees, if that would make it any different." He released her hands and returned to his seat in the window.

"Father," said the other impetuously, coming to his side, "it's only because you and mother don't understand. Won't you try to understand that I know what is best for my own welfare? I belong to the new age — we young people look at everything differently; you are back there twenty or thirty years ago. Young people can't let their future be spoiled because old people think they should act thus

and thus. I know what is good for me and I know that while you mean the best in the world, you are in another age, you have different standards. I am not nearly twenty years old — you are nearly fifty. It's impossible for you and mother to — to understand. It's a matter of age — there's a chasm between us. And I *know* that Jack and I must have each other, or our hearts will be broken."

Zack Flood pondered for some time, while Minna remained leaning upon the back of her chair, expecting him to relent. At last he rose and walked heavily to the door. There he paused. "Minna, you must admit that in return for what we have tried to do for you, you are under a certain obligation."

Minna's face quivered. "I never dreamed you could be cruel to your little girl. I owe you everything. I'd do anything on earth to show my gratitude except give up my only chance of happiness."

"You are eighteen," he continued, as if she had not spoken. "And we have tried to make them eighteen happy years."

"You have, Father. No girl was ever happier than I have been."

"Now I am going to ask the next six months of your life — just six months, Minna. You say I have given you eighteen happy years; you say you'd like to show your gratitude. Then promise me the next six months."

"How? Why, Father, my life is yours."

"Promise that during the next six months you will be as a perfect stranger to Jack Palmer except when circumstances compel you to act as a casual acquaintance. At the end of six months during which there is to be no shadow of romantic nonsense, if you and he are still determined to marry, I shall not consent; but I'll offer no opposition."

Minna sat down, looking miserable. The whole summer would be spoiled, the autumn would prove a perfect blank. "I *must* promise, Father, if you really insist. But —"

"I insist."

"But Juanita Smith!" cried Minna, herself introducing the tiresome name.

"She is not our affair. Jack Palmer will

tell her or not as he thinks best. Give me your word, daughter, your word of honor, your most sacred honor. Come! It isn't a great deal to promise. Just six months."

"Very well," said Minna, faintly. "Very well, then. I promise."

CHAPTER VI

THE PROPOSAL

THE Annual Pendleton Picnic took place in early September — more than two months since Minna's promise to her father. During the summer holiday, Alfred Montgomery recovered some of the strength spent in hard study at the university; but so far from mental relaxation, his mind worked as hard with thoughts of Minna, as if it had been trying to take a degree in love. He had seen her as often as he dared, and, since the disappearance of Jack, that had been nearly every day. Sometimes it was a mere glimpse of her as he drove past Zack Flood's farm — the road past Zack's farm was the most attractive in the county — sometimes they met at gatherings of the young set of Pendleton, that curiously amalgamated "set" which comprised the very few sons and daugh-

ters of the "best people" and enough of the others — who never quite understood how they "got in" — to make up the club dances. And then, there were the evenings when he called, sitting with Minna in the front room, with a view of the living-room where Richard was always reading or writing at a desk, Mrs. Flood sewing, and Zack, in a blue shirt and yellow suspenders, the cuspidor at his feet and the newspaper in his hand, flavoring his politics with a favorite twist.

But although he saw Minna so often, she was as tantalizing a mystery as ever. In some vague way, he found her changed, but though this change was favorable in that it encouraged his attentions, it was disconcerting because nothing seemed to come of it. Every time they were thrown together, it had to be begun all over and it was just as hard to work up to a point in September as it had been in June. Oh, that inscrutable Minna! He could not imagine what was in her mind, and though he often consulted Richard, nothing was gained but the comfort of telling somebody how much he

loved the purest, noblest, most modest and refined of earthly creatures.

"I'm going to tell *her*, the day of the picnic," Alfred confided to Richard as he took her for a drive through country lanes. "It'll be my best chance and my last, for I'll soon be hurrying back to Harvard for another year's grind. I mustn't ask you if you think there's any show for me — if she's confided in you, I mean, because in that case I shouldn't have your own thought —"

"Cousin Minna never confides in me," responded Richard, quietly.

"She's a perfect reservoir of crystal sweetness!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically. "There's no outlet. Any other girl would have told you long ago just what she thought of me — loving you as Minna does. But it's because she doesn't reveal her heart that I can ask your opinion. When I asked her company to the Annual Picnic, she consented instantly. There wasn't the slightest hesitation. That *must* have meant that she was willing to go with me."

"It seemed propitious," was the grave response.

"She didn't *have* to consent," Alfred argued. "There are plenty of other fellows who'd give the world to take her. Besides, she had intended to go in the carriage with you and her parents. But just as soon as I said it would be our last drive, and would she go with me, she consented. What would you call that? She must like me, in a way—in *some* way. Besides there was a distinct color in her cheeks. Before I mentioned driving her to the grounds, there was no color—she was even paler than usual, and I have thought, lately, that she is losing that delicate glow—so beautiful, like a visible warmth. Then when I said it would be our last drive, she blushed. It must have been a blush, because she was pale and then she was rosy—she was more than that, she was red, she was crimson. Could she have been blushing at *me*?"

Richard looked straight ahead and answered, sedately, "I do not know why Cousin Minna blushes."

"Of course she knows I love her. And when I said it would be our last drive, she must have read in my face that I meant to speak out. She *must* have blushed on that account. And yet she might have done that without wanting me to speak out — mightn't she? It could have been mere surprise, couldn't it, or just the thought of the — of the deed and not of the — performer? Look here, Richard, *you* blush sometimes, you know. I've seen you do it."

She turned quickly to look at him with startled eyes and parted lips.

"You're doing it now — and upon my word, Richard, you look quite charming. It's because I surprised you by speaking of it; you were startled, you looked at me — now you're blushing. It must have been that way with Minna." As Richard seemed unduly embarrassed, he went on talking in a matter-of-fact voice. "Of course there's nothing in me to win a girl like your cousin, or any other girl. The only hope I have is based on the curious fact that sometimes people fall in love with the most unlikely

characters — with ugly, stupid folk — Beauty and the Beast. Minna might take a fancy to me just because I'm *not* worthy of it. She might be blind. The rule with women is to admire only strong men, men who can lift weights and strike down powerful foes. I believe if I were real strong, if I could just go out and lift gates on my shoulder — or if I could plow all day long without a thought of the shade over in the fence-corner — But I have to be always guarding myself — I can't sit in draughts and a fellow of my age oughtn't to know when he is *in* a draught. . . . It's not that I complain for myself, but how *can* Minna admire one who couldn't stand up in a good stiff fight? She must feel that I couldn't properly take care of her — and yet, just because that's the rule with women, Minna may be the exception, because she isn't like any other girl in the world."

Her manner was so severe that he fancied her displeased about being forced to blush. "This isn't the first time you have talked about wanting to plow. And now you want to fight!

And lift gates! And sit in draughts! I thought you had a higher aim."

"The highest aim I have is to win Minna's love; beside that, all my other ambitions pale like little stars near a full moon. I'm not interested in anything but Minna. Women like men who can endure hardships, get drenched by rains and not have to take to their beds — spend days under the harvest-sun without getting faint. Minna is so dainty and fairy-like, she needs a muscular husband to protect her. But at the same time, her very delicacy may lead her to prefer a man that's not particularly full-blooded. You see it may be either way — you can't apply logic to Minna. When a girl's in one of the premises, there isn't any logical conclusion."

"There's a logical conclusion to me."

"What is it?"

"Brains are more important in men, and muscle in horses. Therefore —"

"Yes, but would Minna think so?"

"She ought to think everything of you — Uncle Zack says you saved her life."

"I can't understand," cried Alfred, with displeasure, "why Mr. Flood is always talking about *that!*"

"He has only mentioned it once in my hearing."

"That was once too often. There is nothing in it, nothing."

"But *didn't* you?"

"Anything can happen to affect anything else. There's nothing in all this talk of saving life. My life may be saved this minute because you are in the buggy with me—it may be your weight that keeps the horse from running away. If I hadn't kept Minna from drowning others would, if they'd been there."

"Yes, that is the way for *you* to feel. But Cousin Minna ought to feel the *other* way."

"I hope she doesn't. I don't want any favors because of an accident. I want her to weigh me as I am, recognize the fact that I'm weakly, nothing but a student, that I couldn't fight, couldn't plow—"

"Mr. Montgomery," she exclaimed, sharply, "I wish you would turn about. This drive is

protracted." Alfred obeyed mechanically, plunged so deeply in blue thoughts that her manner was unobserved. Suddenly Richard exclaimed, her face quite red, "Nor do I want to be driving with a man who wants to cut himself by any woman's pattern!"

He looked at her in surprise as if just realizing her presence, then smiled. "Well, Richard, I'd give the world to be everything your Cousin Minna would like for me to be."

Richard was strangely angry. "Why don't you get your stage-directions from her, and learn your part?"

He was perplexed. "Wasn't it your boast that you are logical? Stage-directions couldn't give me a man's strength and endurance. Are you displeased with me, Richard?"

"That doesn't matter, if you please Cousin Minna!"

"My dear friend, you don't understand. At sixteen, one hasn't entered the real world. Whenever *you* fall in love you'll discover that all the feelings you ever had were like shadows scattered before the sun. You must know how

dearly I esteem you, for to nobody else do I confide these sacred secrets. But friendship isn't any more like love, than courage or honesty. There isn't anything like love. You can compare the sun to the moon, but there's no comparison for love. It's just *one* — like God. I can't describe it except to say that it means with all the strength of your soul to want to please somebody — I mean, Minna. If she could find this a happier world because I am in it with her — I wouldn't ask for fame or wealth or health or friends; just her adorable self would fill the outlines of my dearest dreams."

Not another word did Richard speak during the drive — perhaps she could not. Her face was still dully red when Alfred drew up at her uncle's gate. He looked hopefully about for a glimpse of Minna, feeling no resentment for Richard's ill-humor though he had hardly recovered from surprise at its manifestation. Perhaps it had sprung from a young girl's impulse to monopolize her only friend — and, after all, it was of little moment. What mattered just then, was a lovely face at the window

where the sugar-maple nodded. Either the face smiled sweetly, or the sunlight among the branches played him a trick — he was thrilled with happiness on the barest benefit of the doubt. In the meantime, Richard, unobserved, had hurried to the toolhouse, and now with face buried among the sheets of paper that described her latest heroine's tears, she shed her own.

If the glimpse of Minna's face at a distant window brought joy, why was not Alfred in ecstasy when that face was almost touching his shoulder, on the morning of the drive to the Annual Pendleton Picnic? That was another mystery about Minna that the young man had not solved: Happiness did not increase as distance lessened. Being so close to him, he could hardly see her at all — that immense-brimmed hat hid not only the little head but most of the body from an eye of Alfred's height; and being so close to him, he must talk. What about? Ah, that is what Alfred should like to have known. It was the cool of the morning, the clear sky promised no rain at the picnic, there would be a great crowd, the scent of September

fields reminded one of schooldays — all this had been diligently discussed. What next?

He remembered how Richard had looked, as, waiting for Zack Flood to hitch up the carriage that was to take her with her uncle and aunt, she had gazed solemnly after her lovely cousin. "Isn't Richard quaint!" he exclaimed, with a sudden affectionate smile.

"Very quaint," was the dry response. No, Minna did not want to talk about Richard. After all, there was but one subject needful of elucidation. The shadows were still sweet in the lanes and the sunlight was mellowed in a glowing haze that softened all the sharp edges of the world. Two miles would bring them to the small town of Pendleton; his story of love must not be more than two miles long. He tried to approach it lightly, feeling that Minna must not be frightened by the holding forth of commonplace marriage-bonds.

"Minna, this is our last ride, you know . . . and I would like to drag in a subject that's all-important to me, before I go back East. It's a subject, a subject that I must drag in by —

drag in by my hook — a lá Captain Cuttle, you understand . . .” Alfred could not dance on eggs.

“Oh, yes, Captain Cuttle,” said Minna in an interested tone. “He was the man in that horrid trig. example, that made us find the leg of the triangle, wasn’t he? Some of the girls sat up all night to figure it out to the tenth decimal place, but I had such an awful headache that night I was excused. Yes, I’ll never forget the leg of *that* triangle.”

He would gladly have let it go at that, had she not shown such an antipathy for her mathematical Cuttle that he feared she might associate *his* legs in the same low standing. “I referred to ‘Dombey and Son.’”

“Oh, yes,” cried the other with such animation that she tilted her hat-brim high enough for him to see her smiling lips and one eye. “Wasn’t that the longest novel you ever read in all your *life*! They made us take it as supplementary reading and honestly I just thought I wouldn’t last through it. Everybody died at the beginning of it, and got divorced at the end, but

they were so *long* about it. I'll never forget that novel to my dying day; we girls had a big supper one night up in my room, and Jenny Black overturned the lamp; it was perfectly *terrible*, and all the girls sitting on the floor making Welsh rarebit and getting in each other's way and just dying with chilled laughter — that's the kind the matron mustn't hear. I grabbed up 'Dombey and Son' to try to work off a chapter before the midnight luncheon was ready so I'd have *that* much out of the way, when Jenny Black — she was working away at that horrid example about the other leg of the triangle — yes, I got Captain Cuttle out of *my* book into *hers*, didn't I? It was Cauvenant's example, or Chauvenant's, or somebody beginning with C. Jenny got so mad because she couldn't get the answer (we'd chipped in to buy a 'key') that she said, of a sudden — but it doesn't matter what she *said*, it was just about the triangle's leg, and with that she stuck out her own — she moved her foot real quick, and it sent that lamp rolling. We were almost bursting to keep from laughing at what she said

— it wasn't anything — and perfectly wild with terror for fear we'd be burned alive. Oh, those days at school, weren't they too lovely to last! ”

Alfred had never found her so bewitching. Such naïvety, freshness, innocence, confidence! And how joyous she was! Evidently she was glad to be with him. His heart beat rapidly, and it was impossible to restrain the admiration inspired by her adorable personality. “ Oh, Minna — I love you! ” His emotion was so profound, so irrepressible, he felt he could go on pouring forth words to the end of time, words painting her charms and depicting his devotion. But he couldn't. All had been said. He sought desperately for any adequate addition — everything was a blank but the one truth. He uttered it again in a thrilling voice — “ *I love you!* ”

“ You mustn't. ” All the ripple had vanished from her voice.

“ I — I can't help it. I love you. Minna, listen: I love you! ”

“ But you mustn't! ” Her tone was faint.

He hoped her opposition was no stronger than her voice. Again he sought desperately for words. In talking to Richard about Minna, there had been more than enough. He remembered vaguely that he had said something to Richard which, after pronouncement, had struck him as pretty good. It was about wealth and health and fame and about the outlines of all his dreams. He couldn't remember enough of it to use. "Minna — but I can't help it! Dear Minna — if there were *any* prospect — any prospect in the world that some day — I don't care *how* far off — *some* day you might be my wife . . ."

"There'll never be the prospect," she said, still faint and trembling.

"But you are quite sure?"

"I know it. Yes, I am sure."

"You couldn't *possibly* love me? I don't mean to annoy you with it, Minna, but I've loved you so long that I can't give it up till you've made it clear that it will never be any use. I'd wait for you — forever."

"It couldn't ever possibly be. You know

we've always been friends, Alfred. I hope we'll always be good friends."

"But you don't like me enough to feel that you could ever like me better?"

"No. I never could."

"I'm not surprised, dear, the wonder would be if you could care for me. But when we're in love, we expect wonders, and I've almost expected — *you!* But I'll not distress you with letting you see how much I care. I'm naturally a serious sort of chap — a stick; but I'll be as gay at the picnic as I ever am anywhere. So you mustn't think your day is to be spoilt. Minna, this is a sort of good-by — not that I'll ever cease to love you, for I couldn't possibly love another — the feeling has grown up within me from early boyhood. I've never had any dream of happiness except the one with your name — dear name! — *Minna!* I always knew I wasn't worthy of the dream — but it came anyway, came with the air I breathed. I suppose many a king's dream has slipped through a peasant's window. Minna, I'll say

good-by to all that and — and — will you let me kiss you good-by? ”

“ But you are not going to leave me, Alfred.”

“ I know; but it's good-by all the same.”

“ I can't let you do — that.”

“ Not as a comrade bidding adieu to a wounded soldier? ”

“ But I can't let you do — that. No, I can't let you! ”

“ You think even so little of me? ”

She did not answer. But her hat continued in the negative, and he said no more.

CHAPTER VII

RICHARD'S KISS

THE Annual Pendleton Picnic was held in Gridge's pasture, whose ten acres of deep ravines and steep ridges lay just beyond the southern limit of the straggling town. B. M. Gridge was one of the most interesting men in the community, not by virtue of anything he ever did, said, or thought, but because he owned and conducted the largest drygoods store in Pendleton, and because he had never been married.

"He's a mighty fine fellow," declared Zack Flood earnestly, in answer to Juanita Smith's slighting remark. Her ridicule deserved serious rebuke, but Zack was so glad to meet her in the noisy crowd, that he could not help smiling. Juanita was running away from B. M. Gridge at that moment.

"Help! help!" she panted. "*I have* to go

to the city with him on the four o'clock train — aunt will chaperone us — there's a great actress at the Western Opera House, first of the season, and I *have* to go. You know how persevering he is. He never lets up and at last aunt said I must, isn't it awful! But I won't spend the day with him, the night's enough."

Zack listened with his slow, amused smile. He was always glad to meet Juanita because she always treated him as if he were young. And she was so little — surely the smallest creature in the world who ever had a lover as big as Jack Palmer — it was impossible for the farmer to take her quite seriously. He couldn't help liking the girl who talked to him at greater length and with more freedom than his own daughter, and who was so quick, so animated, so bright-faced; and whose diminutive stature made her harshest word seem amusing. Moreover, if there was in the world a bigger bore than any other in Zack's world, it was this Annual Pendleton Picnic. To walk from one hollow to another, drink at the lemonade-stand, eat at the peanut-wagon,

listen to the public speakers who could not be condensed as if they were newspapers — what was this to the farmer? It was worse after dinner because you always ate too much and there was that to consider. But Minna liked it, the noises and flashing colors of several thousand people completely absorbed her — there was not left to view so much as a bit of her hat brim. She was everywhere, mingling in the gay laughter — then presto! she was nowhere.

In the meantime here was Juanita, hurrying Zack from one crowd to another in mad flight from B. M. Gridge. “He *looks* like a dry-goods man,” said Juanita, “and like nothing else. You can’t be near him without feeling like walking up to his counter. He lets this pretty place all go to waste while he steeps his soul in thread and pins.”

“He’d like to steep his soul in you,” remarked the other, knowing how hopelessly his old friend was infatuated in the tiny morsel clinging to his arm.

She gave her head a sharp toss that made

him laugh. "I never held his age against him," she declared, "but he's not satisfied with it, himself. If I was a hundred, I'd *be* a century. But Mr. Gridge is all the time trying to get back his youth. They *say* that he stands on his hands every morning before breakfast — that's for suppleness. And I know *myself* that when he comes to see me, he spends half the time trying to balance himself on one chair-leg, thinking I'm not noticing what he's doing — that's for control of his muscles. I wish he'd fall over, and maybe some evening he will! He doesn't care for anything but physical exercises and his store. I thought when my engagement was publicly announced that I could do something, but no! You see, aunt is blinded, she thinks he's everything, and he pretends to come to see us both; and it's aunt that he declares must see that great actress. I'll just be tagging along. But *I* understand 'em. They can't fool *me*! I know aunt wouldn't marry him if he owned half a dozen stores. All right — neither would I!" she added defiantly. Then she laughed rue-

fully. "But did you ever *know* anything like it — to be engaged to one man, and have your own family encouraging another one in his attentions!"

"Perhaps your aunt thinks . . ."

"I suppose she does. But what of it? Everything's fixed. Who's going to change because of what she thinks? Let *her* have your B. M. Gridge!"

Zack Flood turned abruptly to the thought uppermost in his mind. "Juanita, Richard told me a while ago — But do you know where Jack Palmer is, to-day?"

She smiled with a pretty blush of happy proprietorship. "He's in the city, hard at work, as he's been for two months. *He'll* show you worldly-wise farmers that he can make a living as well as lose a farm. When Jack had to go to work because nothing was left, he just *went* to work. Poor fellow, it's awfully hot for him over there, and every day just the same — but he'll come out at the top! You'll see, Mr. Zachariah Flood! I want you and your old school-chum, B. M. Gridge, to be

in the front row at the church when the pews are ribboned off."

"Poor B. M.!" murmured Zack. "There never was a kinder or more reliable man. He deserves a better fate than your front bench. The reason I asked about Jack — Richard told me, not long ago, that she saw him in a buggy."

"When?"

"About two o'clock."

"*To-day?* Oh, that was somebody else. It must have been somebody else because Jack is hard at work. He asked for a holiday to come to the picnic, and those horrid bears that think they own him body and soul, wouldn't let him off. I had a note from him last night telling me not to expect him."

"Then of course it was somebody else. And Richard is near-sighted, anyway. But Jack is pretty easy to distinguish in a crowd."

"It was somebody else," remarked Juanita, indifferently. "Richard is such an odd little hermit — I don't think she knows how anybody looks, for she always has her eyes in a magazine."

Just then a bevy of some twenty girls all of about the same age, and all in white dresses and white slippers and stockings came surging upon them, and Juanita was borne away, the smallest by far of the crowd, and the merriest. Thus rudely snatched back from his dip into the far-away years, Zack Flood, with a smile that showed the youth-light still lingered, went in search of his wife.

He found her on a long bench appropriated by tired mothers and a few bored fathers. They were all farmer-folk looking rather wistfully at the town throngs that swept noisily by, and thinking of the homegoing and the cares and chickens at the end of it. Their forms were shrunken forward as if feeling the need of accustomed burdens to hold the shoulders erect, but their faces had the grim determination of those who never meant to say die.

Zack sank upon the bench beside Mrs. Flood with—"When do you reckon Minna will get enough of this?"

"O Zack!" she reproached him. "The

afternoon has hardly begun. She will want to stay till the moon rises. And I'm not a *bit* tired. I'm enjoying myself the best in the world!"

"Yes," said Zack, staring at the trees that shaded them, "it's awful fun. Wonder why B. M. doesn't cut out those dead branches? To-morrow I'm going to change my cattle to the East Meadow. It ought to have been done to-day. Say, honey, Richard told me awhile ago that she saw Jack Palmer in a buggy, driving out of the grounds."

"Jack Palmer!" echoed his wife, with an uneasy movement.

"Yes. But Juanita says he isn't here. Richard says he had a girl with him but she couldn't see who it was, he drove so fast. Juanita might be mistaken, you know. Jack has a way of bobbing up. It'd be pretty tough on Juanita if he *is* after some other girl — Richard ought to know Jack half a mile away."

She spoke with some severity. "Richard shouldn't have said a word about it unless she

were certain. And if she knew it was Jack, she ought to know the girl with him."

He scrutinized her silently. He knew his wife's ways so thoroughly that he was instantly aware of something hidden. It might be that she was displeased with Richard about something, in which case — especially if it related to Minna — whatever Richard might say or do would be censured. Mrs. Flood had no more use for Jack Palmer than he, and they were equally pleased that "business in the city" should keep him out of the community. "Richard was just surprised and told me because she thought —"

"Of course she would tell *you*," Mrs. Flood interposed, displeased. "She has not been near *me* since dinner. I think it strange that she should say she doesn't know who the girl was. If she knew Jack, she ought to have known the girl. Juanita is going to the city with Mr. Gridge to the theater, and while there, she expects to see Jack. Her aunt told me so. I think Richard had very little to do to report what she couldn't have been sure of."

Zack wandered away, thoughtful. His wife's speech had convinced him that she was hiding something of serious import. He could have found out what it was by inquiry, had he known what to ask. This vague uncertainty made him restless, and having nothing else to do, he concluded to seek Richard and, if possible, learn something definite.

It was difficult to find any one in that ever-shifting scene, and particularly Richard who had developed no intimacies since coming to live with the Floods, hence was not to be expected as part of any flying squadron of femininity. However, Zack continued his search moved by a nameless uneasiness concerning he hardly knew what.

In the meantime, if Richard had feared she might be sought for, she could hardly have found a more advantageous hiding-place than the little hollow where, at that very moment, she lay on shadowed turf. It was a sort of grass-well, sunk in the midst of that dry world of social activity for the catching of happiness. It was not deep enough to tap such a bubbling

spring, but there was at least promise of content. Resting upon the sloping side, Richard could hear the blending of myriad voices, the passing footsteps, the stamping and neighing of tethered horses, and always the violent clashings of the local band with the steam merry-go-round. Best of all, nobody could see her, unless beaten paths were forsaken — and nearly everybody follows the paths made by other feet. She had found this verdant well because of a tendency to avoid places where everybody goes; happiness started a trickling vein when Alfred Montgomery peeped over the margin.

“I see!” cried Alfred, scrambling down beside her, and propping himself against the only tree. “The way to enjoy a picnic is to keep away from it.” His manner was so gay that Richard fairly glowed, and glowing, looked like a new Richard, a Richard too thin, no doubt, but counting a great deal for what there was of her.

Unfortunately, Alfred’s gaiety was the forced nonchalance of a hero, who calls his

mortal wound a "mere scratch." It was too great an effort to keep it up. "I'm all in, Richard," he confided, but without uttering the groan in his heart. "I mention it to post you up; and now we'll not speak a word — just rest in silence."

He closed his eyes to indicate that he wasn't there.

Her color ebbed, vanished. The hollow seemed coldly deserted, whereas before the young man's coming, thoughts had filled it to the brim.

"She said," suddenly announced Alfred, who was there after all, "that she could never care for me. I am simply impossible. I'm so dry and prosy and boresome that a million years wouldn't make me mellow. The longer I am, the more knotty and gnarled I grow! She plunged those heavenly autumn-brown eyes into the remotest future, but she couldn't see me." He relapsed.

Richard stirred uneasily.

A shower of confetti directed against an invisible enemy rained down upon them. The

whine of the merry-go-round continued to jab into the continuity of the brass band's popular air. The high notes of a public speaker evoked visions of a pungent platform of undressed pine, its uprights swathed in red, white and blue, the sun boiling the resin out of its exposed boards, and the bit of ice early giving up the unequal contest in the water-pitcher.

"It doesn't matter whether I'm here or there," he suddenly declared. "I've lost the sense of variety. China would seem the same as California, without her. And there'll never be an end to this. . . . I'll always want her and she'll never want me. If it were any physical hurt, you'd know time would cure it, or you'd die. But I'll never be cured and I suppose I won't die. I'm too weakly. Did you ever notice that it's generally the strong people that do the dying?"

Richard started to her feet. "I wish you wouldn't talk about dying," she exclaimed. "It hurts me."

"It needn't. I don't mind. There's no Minna for me, and I don't want anything else.

I'll go to-morrow — not that I care whether I do anything at the university or not — that's ceased to interest me. But I must get away, I mustn't see her again."

Richard saw the world in cold gray tints.

"I'm a brute to come here and spoil your reveries. But the truth is, Richard, I'm so selfish, I'm willing to make you unhappy to get ever so little comfort. You see how weak I am — in every way. But it would be different if I didn't know it's for always. I'll never be any good because I'm too poor to live in the open air in a climate that might make me strong. I must make my living with my wits, practicing law when I'm fit for it, and there's nothing about me for a woman to love, nobody *could* care for me because I'm no good, and oh, you can't imagine how I want to be loved — by her! I don't know why I let myself suppose she or anybody else could take a fancy to me. This isn't despondency. The only merit I claim is looking squarely in the face of facts."

Richard interposed breathlessly: "If you go to-morrow, I won't see you again, will I?"

“Not until next vacation — a whole year — a long, long doleful —”

“Then if this is the last time we are to meet . . . And you are very, *very* sure that your unfortunate attachment is forever and ever?”

“Yes — just the way you said it, Richard. You understand me.”

“Then, since we’re to meet no more, and you are always to love Cousin Minna — I am going to tell you something.” But instead of telling him what was in her mind, she stopped short and colored painfully, trying in vain to still the strange, wild beating of her heart.

Alfred, seated with his back against the tree, hands lying loosely between his knees, did not look up. In his mood of utter dejection, what could he care to see?

“There is one thing,” exclaimed Richard, escaping from her former purpose and seeming harsh because desperately hiding her real feeling; “you are a great deal more than you claim. There is a world of entertainment and — and high talk in you. Why *will* you try to make

yourself out nothing? Why are *you* determined to make everybody believe you a minor character? Did you ever hear me say I'm nothing but a poor orphan? I know there's something in *me* — I can feel it; some day it'll come out in a big book, then people will find me out. Now they think me what you say you are — nothing! But I *know* I'm great — that upholds me!" Her eyes burned and her head lifted itself proudly, but the next moment, tears came at sight of his haggard face. She moved impulsively to his side. "Oh — if I could give you some of my courage!" she exclaimed, clenching her hand over her heart.

"Dear little friend!" he murmured, reaching up to take her hand. "You'd make me brave if you could, but at this moment, I confess, I'm a coward. Isn't there a tiny bit of credit just in the confession? I'm afraid, oh, Richard, I'm afraid of — life and its long desert stretches!" He smiled in a way to touch her deeply. "My 'high talk.' Thank you! But that's really a disadvantage, it's a barrier I can't surmount. . . . I wonder what Jack

says to her? *They* can talk together. . . . Do you observe that I want a little credit even in giving everything up? I'm still human, you see! Don't be unhappy about me; the fact is, I'm not worth it. Truly, I am an exceedingly minor character and *so* uncomfortable, for with every bit of my soul — which seems unusually large, now that I think of it —" another smile half whimsical, half melancholy — "I want what is never to be mine."

"Make it yours by wanting it all the harder. Oh, be brave — *be* brave so you'll not dishonor me! Because I have made you my knight." Richard swiftly stooped and kissed him upon the brow. "It's good for you to know," she faltered, panic-stricken at what she had done, "that — somebody — can love you . . . somebody *does!*" With that, she fled, leaving him breathless, gazing after her with bewildered eyes, still feeling the soft warmth of her lips.

Richard was so dazed by the deed she could never have thought possible, that she almost ran into her uncle without observing him.

"Found at last!" exclaimed Zack, catching her arm as she fled. "Look here, my dear, haven't you the *slightest* notion who that girl was?"

She looked at him, her face crimson, her bosom tumultuous. "I don't understand," she faltered guiltily. Did he mean herself? She was conscious that he watched her narrowly and that she looked stupidly over his head, but it was impossible to collect her wits or control her features.

He tried again: "Absolutely sure that was Jack Palmer in the buggy?"

"Oh," faltered Richard, still panting. "Yes. I know it was. I *know* it." She repeated the words in a wild effort to regain composure. "Oh, yes, it was Mr. Jack Palmer — not a doubt of it."

"Which way did they go?" he demanded sternly. Her manner confirmed his worst fears. She pointed with trembling hand. In that direction lay his farm.

It was not long after, when he drew his wife to one side: "Honey, I've hitched up — go-

ing over to the house for awhile — thought I'd explain, so if you missed me . . ."

"Going home?" Mrs. Flood echoed, startled. "But what will Minna say? Minna might want the horses for something; or she might need you."

"I don't expect to be gone over an hour. Two-mile drive there and back and —"

"But aren't you enjoying the picnic? It will seem so strange to Minna for you to go back home."

"I've taken a notion in my head," he answered, rather jerkily, "that Jack Palmer is up to something. Richard says he drove in that direction and I wouldn't be surprised to find him at our house, both him and that girl. Of course it's a curious notion. All mine are. Anyway I'll be glad to tell you when I come back, that I found the farm deserted."

"I'm going with you." Mrs. Flood was pale.

"But if Minna missed you, honey, wouldn't she think it strange?"

"As you said, we won't be gone long."

She hurried after him to the outskirts of the grove where many horses were fastened.

He made no effort to dissuade her. "When did you see Minna last?" he inquired as he turned the wheel for her to get into the carriage.

"Oh, not so very long ago — at noon — at the picnic dinner. What time is it now?"

"After four. Juanita and her aunt have already left for the city with B. M. Gridge." He drove rapidly out upon the road.

"I thought *I* saw Jack Palmer in a buggy, about one o'clock," faltered Mrs. Flood, presently. "I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure. There was just a flash of him as he passed. I saw the girl plainer than I did him."

"Know her?" he looked swiftly back over the front seat.

"I — it seemed so." She was leaning back against the cushion with a pallid face.

"Who did you think it was?"

"Everything was so sudden," she murmured faintly.

He lashed at the horses, and they, unused to

the whip, bounded forward. It was all he could do to draw them down from a gallop, and not another word was spoken till the yard-gate was reached.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO MARRIAGES

AT the gate, Zack Flood leaped out and began tying the horses.

“What are you doing?” exclaimed his wife, with apprehensive gaze.

“Aren’t you going to drive me up to the house?”

As he swiftly tightened the slipknot, his eyes devoured the yard, house and barnlot beyond. Everything in sight was exactly as he had left it on driving away to the picnic that morning — with one exception. An upstairs window was open — the window near which the sugar-maple held its leafy screen — the window of Minna’s room.

It seemed to Mrs. Flood that he had hardly touched the ground before he was darting over the stile. “Zack!” she called, piteously, “oh, Zack!”

He looked back, without slackening his pace. His feet were winged with the magic of youth; but the face he turned toward her was pinched and whitened as with sudden age. His boot rang upon the front porch before she could find strength to creep from the carriage.

The front door was locked, as he had left it. Even while thrusting the key into the lock, he shot a glance toward the lot, thinking that from the porch-elevation, he might catch sight of a horse and buggy hidden behind the barn. The grassless extent surrounding the barn showed nothing in the mellow sunlight but the long feeding-trough where a cat lay sleeping, the scattered corncobs — forming a network of silver, pearl and gold — and six or seven mules that had straggled up from the pasture against feeding-time.

He dashed open the door, and almost fell into the front room. The house was as silent as the deserted farm. There was the sudden deadness of wall-enclosed air after a hot day spent in the open, and the strangeness of deathlike stillness to oppose his agony.

The large apartment, a sitting-room, had four doors. Besides the one he had entered, there was one opening out upon a side-porch, one leading to the parlor, and one communicating with the dining-room. With swift strides he reached the other outside door and drew it open — since his departure that morning, it had been unfastened.

He ran next to the dining-room door, for in that room was the staircase. This door was never locked, but now he could not open it. Some one held the knob on the other side in a grip not to be overcome.

Resistance infuriated the farmer. He muttered between his teeth in a low voice, as if to himself, "I'll get it open!"

In a corner behind an old-fashioned étagère stood his shotgun. He darted thither, but it had been so long since the weapon was in his hand, that the piece of furniture had become wedged against it. In drawing it out, the contents of its fragile shelves came crashing to the floor — shells, albums, loose photographs, bits of coral, gilt-edged books of poems. Because

of the delay from this downfall, the inner door opened before he could snatch forth the gun. When he wheeled about, his antagonist had already entered the room — he stood, now, with his back against the closed door.

With the man he sought unexpectedly before him and in his power, Zack Flood lost his feverish sense of the need of haste. Standing in the midst of the wreckage, he raised the gun to his shoulder, pausing before it was adjusted, then overcoming his hesitation rather by force of will than flame of passion.

“I am going to kill you,” he said, and his tone was touched by something like surprise.

If he had seen any cowardly shrinking, any craven show of mortal terror, of impotent guilt, all would have been over in a moment. But Jack Palmer stood not only erect and brave, but calmly at his ease. Into the chaos of the farmer’s mind shot the disconcerting thought that the young man was wonderfully handsome while the impression he produced of bulk and vitality somehow gave to the deadly threat a touch of the grotesque. What had happened

between this interloper and his daughter had happened for all time; but if he took the other's life, it must be now, and the instant the parlor door was snatched open and his daughter darted into the room with a wild scream, he knew the decisive moment was lost.

As Minna, with outstretched arms, rushed forward to seize the threatening weapon, her mother came in from the front porch, and stood appalled.

"Father!" shrieked Minna. "You don't understand. He is my husband—we were married more than a month ago . . ."

"Married!" Mrs. Flood echoed. "Minna!" Her amazement kept her voice scarce above a whisper, but even on receiving this astounding fact, she sought desperately to turn it to her daughter's defense. "*Now* you understand, Zack," she faltered, addressing her husband with glazed eyes. "You see how it is. They—they married and—and were afraid to tell."

"Did *you* know?" he asked, with sudden fierceness.

"You see," she cried, laughing hysterically, "it was all to be explained at the right time . . . at the right time—" She fell to the floor, unconscious.

Zack turned away from Minna, and quietly replaced the gun in the corner. "Did your mother know?" he asked, not looking round.

Minna sank down beside the prostrate figure. "Oh, my darling mother!" she moaned. "Mother! Have I broken your heart? Won't you speak to me? Father! she doesn't move — she isn't breathing. Come quick. Mother! Mother!"

Mrs. Flood quivered, brought back to the world by the voice that might almost have recovered her from death.

Minna lifted the white face in her arm and kissed it convulsively. "You have forgiven me, haven't you, Mother? You have forgiven us both, haven't you?" She burst into passionate weeping. "Oh, I'm afraid you are going to be ill — Father, I'm afraid she is going to be ill!"

Mrs. Flood tried to whisper a protest.

"Let me lift her on the couch," said Jack, coming forward.

Zack stepped between him and the women. "Did she know about your marriage?" he demanded in a restrained voice.

"Now I know this is a great surprise to you, Mr. Flood, and I'm awfully sorry about that part of it, though there didn't seem any other way. And I can understand very well that you'd rather see the devil than me, at present — so I'll leave. We were married at the county-seat the day of Minna's auto-party . . . and when Mrs. Flood is well, we can talk it all over, and decide on what we are to do."

"Don't go — *that* way," came the feeble voice of Mrs. Flood. "Come here, Jack."

With a light step he gained Minna's side, and knelt beside her.

"You love Minna," Mrs. Flood faltered, "love me, too."

He answered heartily, "Sure! Why, Mrs. Flood, haven't I always loved this family? I don't see why we couldn't be perfectly happy, all of us together. Let me lift you up."

"No, I want to lie here, awhile. I am so tired. My heart isn't as strong as it used to be, and that picnic was very hot and tiresome — and so long."

"Bring the sofa-pillow, Jack," whispered Minna.

"Oh, no, Minna, dear, you aren't tired holding my head, are you?"

"How could I be tired of holding you?" exclaimed Minna in self-reproach. "And, Mother, you are a perfect angel. We *had* to marry, or be miserable all our lives. You wouldn't want your little girl to die of a broken heart, I know."

"I want my little girl to be oh — so, so happy —" Mrs. Flood suddenly burst into uncontrollable sobbing. "You'll make her happy, Jack, won't you?"

"I'm going to do my best, Mrs. Flood, my very best."

"He is *all* my happiness!" cried Minna. "But father was so set against it that we *knew* he never *could* understand; it wouldn't be any use to try to make him see things in their true

light. If we'd waited a thousand years, it would have been the same to him."

"You only promised to wait six months," said Zack.

"And — and besides — anyway, it's done, *now*; we can't have it any other way; it's *done*."

"As I understand it," said Zack, restrainedly, "you got married the day you toured to the city? There were four of you in the car — you two and Juanita Smith and B. M. Gridge?"

"Yes, and Mr. Gridge was so devoted to Juanita —"

"Who was your betrothed, I believe?" he turned to Jack, politely.

"Well — and — and Jack and I thought it would be a — it would be so — so *funny*, you know — oh, Father, you could *never* understand. It's all in the new world, the new thought . . . We stopped at the county-seat for dinner, and while Mr. Gridge was showing Juanita the town, we slipped to the justice's —"

Suddenly Jack gave a curious sound which he tried to cover by a racking cough. He felt

sincerely sorry for all this unhappiness, but to save his life he couldn't help remembering how the infatuated B. M. Gridge had triumphed when carrying away Juanita to see the sights.

"I believe I am all right, now," murmured Mrs. Flood. "Help me up, Daughter — and — and Jack — my son . . ."

They lifted her gently to a chair while her husband looked on without protest. He said to Minna:

"And you call that 'funny.' I should call it — but I am old-fashioned, no doubt."

"Yes, Father," she cried, quickly, "you *are* old-fashioned, the dearest old-fashioned father that ever lived, but still — but still, you are *not* in — in the current of life as — it — is lived to-day, and you *can't* see how we look at it — I mean, Jack and I . . ."

"And Juanita," added her father, simply. "*She* thinks it funny, too? Or does she know anything about it?"

"You see," Minna explained, "it *had* to be kept a secret from *her* because if it *was* to be a secret, *nobody* must know; and of course we'd

have told you and mother if we'd told anybody. So we *couldn't* tell Juanita, though Jack felt miserable about it."

"I've felt all the time that she ought to know," declared Jack, "and since I couldn't explain, I've kept out of her sight. I just drove over to-day from the nearest station to see — my wife. I didn't mean for any of you to know. I hoped this could be kept hidden till Minna's six months' promise was up so that — well, I hardly know how to explain it. I might as well say frankly that we loved each other and couldn't wait, but we did our best to spare your feelings."

"I'll telegraph to Juanita," remarked Zack, collectedly; "I can get her at the hotel and I'd rather she'd know how things stand, before she comes back to Pendleton."

"Hadn't you better leave that to me?" asked Jack, coldly.

"Oh, no, I'm afraid you wouldn't do it." Minna burst into tears.

"Zack!" his wife reproached him. "Isn't everything sad enough without making it worse?"

As Minna says, it can't be helped. It's done, now. Zack, you are as hard as stone — you are breaking Minna's heart."

"But she's not going to break mine," said Zack, suddenly bringing his clenched fist down upon his desk with such violence that the top was split. He turned his back on them, but it was only for a moment. When he turned again, his face was white, but his eyes steady, his voice in good control. He looked at Jack. "You made a good suggestion awhile ago. I wish you'd leave us till I can get this thing thoroughly fixed in my mind."

The young man stepped to the door with alacrity, saying, "I am awfully sorry . . . I'll do everything in my power to make you like me."

"I do like you," was Zack's surprising response.

"Minna's happiness is the first consideration of our hearts," called Mrs. Flood, consolingly. "It's hard for us to understand how our little girl — without letting us know — oh, without

a word!" She started laughing again — the laughter that never provokes response; but she clenched her teeth in the fierce determination to master herself. "We'll be all right," she gasped. "We do like you, Jack, and we would give our lives to make Minna happy."

When Jack was gone, the little family, now so strange to one another, remained silent for some time. Although Minna felt that her father had just cause to be disappointed in her, she did not think him justified in such lengths of disappointment. It was axiomatic that she and Jack must marry, and the delay of six months could have made no difference, except to lose that space of happiness out of their lives. And at the end of six months, it would have been just as bitter for her parents. Of course, it seemed wrong to take so vital a step without a word of warning. Yes, it *was* wrong. But if one's father and mother do not forgive, surely forgiveness is a mockery. Everything considered, her mother had been brave. She was a real mother, and Minna, kneeling beside

her chair with her arms about the fragile form, sobbed repentently, and pled for the old love, knowing it was hers already.

When Zack roused himself from a state of intense reflection, he telephoned a telegraphic message to the Pendleton station-agent for Juanita Smith's aunt. Then he drew a chair near his wife, and bade Minna take it.

"I want you both to listen to me with close attention," he said, at the same time seating himself opposite them. If his hand or voice had trembled, if his eyes had dimmed, Minna would have thrown herself in his lap with passionate entreaties for Jack's pardon. But he was so matter-of-fact and apparently so indifferent, that the girl was hardened. She turned a cold, set face to him; it was Mrs. Flood, understanding him better, who showed great agitation, threatening every moment to interrupt his even flow of carefully-chosen words.

"I am forty-nine. To young people like Minna and Jack, that seems pretty old — old enough for me to be willing to retire — as a back number — to fall quietly into the ranks

of the old men. But to a fellow of sixty or seventy, I'm still in my prime. It's all as you look at it. And *this* is the way that *I* look at it: my life isn't finished, yet. Since I bought this farm I've been at the head of it; I've added to it till we have about seven hundred acres; and it's mine. If crops are good or bad, it's all between me and the weather. Everything's planted as I say, and grows as the Lord pleases. This means living, to me, and I don't feel ready, yet, to have others regulate my life. I'm not young, neither am I so far along as to let others lead me where I would not go, as the Bible says."

"Poor Minna!" murmured Mrs. Flood, stroking her erect head. "You mustn't feel so toward your father. There's nothing he wouldn't do for your sake."

"Yes," responded Zack, "there's *one* thing I wouldn't do. I can't cease being Zack Flood. I'd give my life for Minna, I'd give every cent I have in the world to you two, if necessary; but I'll not give up my independence. So I am going away."

"Going away!" his wife echoed, in terror. "Zack! When? For how long?"

"And the question for you to decide, honey," his voice suddenly softened, "is, whether or not you'll go with me."

"But I can't go anywhere, now. I'm not ready for any kind of journey —"

"You won't have to get ready. It isn't the sort of journey you need make preparations for. It's simply to drop out of our lives."

She was thrilled with the quick thought that he must have lost his mind.

"And we'll begin all over again," he added, simply.

"But I'm too old to begin life all over," she reasoned. "And our life is good as it is. We have Minna and we have our home and —"

"It'll be a week before I can get things in shape," he remarked. "That'll give you time to think it over carefully —"

"But there's nothing to consider. We can't leave Minna and besides, here is your farm —"

"I'll have a lot to do," he said, rising abruptly. "There's all that cattle to be put

in the other pasture . . . yes, while I stay, I'll look after things the same as if it were for always. But I'll have to go to the city the first of the week — I'll be gone only a day, I think. Then I'll come back and make out the papers. You'll have to make up your mind by that time, honey, whether you'll go or stay. I'll divide this farm into two equal parts, and make over half of it to Minna. If you go with me, I'll sell the other half and we'll take the money to start our new lives in another state. But if you stay here, I'll have the other half made over for you to do what you please with."

"Zack, are you losing your mind? O Zack!" she started up and ran to throw her arms about him. "What can you mean? God help us all — you are thinking of deserting me — deserting your wife — *deserting* after our vows to cling to each other till death — I won't *let* you go away — you *wouldn't* do what you have said — it's because you're angry with your poor little girl who is miserable enough without this cruel blow from you."

Minna's mouth was compressed to a hard

pale line. She did not believe she could ever feel the same toward her father after his horrible threat.

"No, honey, I'll not desert you," he cried, putting his arm about the thin, quivering form. "I'll take you with me and we'll find what happiness we can. I never dreamed of going without you, if you consent. Say you'll go."

"But how *can* we go? Here is the farm. And we can't leave Minna."

"Minna is provided for. She has a husband, and I will deed her three hundred and twenty-five acres. Minna won't need us."

"But we need her, Zack."

"No. I used to think we did, but we don't."

"I need her, Zack, I couldn't be happy very far from Minna. Would it be very far?"

"So far, we would neither hear of her nor see her again — at least till five or ten years had passed."

"But I couldn't agree to that — you know I couldn't take the heart out of my bosom —"

"Then I shall go alone."

"You *do* mean to desert me! Oh, my

God! After all these years — and I have tried to be a good wife to you — I *have* been a true wife, true and devoted.”

“As there is a God, I shall never desert you. If I go alone, it will be because you refuse to go where I go and lodge where I shall lodge.”

“Go with him, Mother,” said Minna, bitterly. “He cannot forgive me and I must not separate you.”

Zack looked at her, unmoved. “I have forgiven you, Daughter; I have no feeling toward you but love and pity.”

She laughed. “Then you must hate Jack as much as I love him.”

“I like Jack well enough. This is no sudden impulse; I’m not moved by resentment or anything of the sort. Of course some will call me crazy and others will say it’s pure stubbornness. But I made up my mind long ago. If you’d kept your promise to wait six months —”

“*Don’t* reproach her, Zack. Doesn’t she feel bad enough?”

“If you’d waited the six months, then married Jack, it would have been the same. Jack

and I couldn't live together on a farm — there never was one laid out big enough. He wouldn't do a day's work in ten years, and I couldn't help working as hard as ever — only I'd feel I was doing it all for Jack — I mean to get away while I can. I want my work to be done for my wife and child — or just for myself if it must be — not for a big, lazy — oh, yes, I like him. . . . There's no use talking; it doesn't help."

"You are cruel, Father. You are terribly unjust. Jack means to go to work —"

"Of course he means to. Only, he'll never begin. He let his own farm melt away from under his very feet — though he knew that if his mother lived she'd be without a home, yet it didn't stir him to act. I'm not blaming him, that's not my business. But I know he'd never do anything. I'm a very plain sort of ordinary individual, there are no trimmings or flutings about me — but I don't mean to be any man's servant."

"But Jack *is* going to work. He was unfortunate with his farm. Could he help it if

the corn wouldn't grow? And he is *determined* to exert himself. He says he means to go into work for all there is in him. People change, Father. And — and it's very unkind for you to hold the past against Jack. People work hard enough when there's something to work for. You think you can see into the future, but nobody can. Just because he didn't work himself to death when he was a boy, you imagine he won't work now that he has a wife to support! You are wrong,—but you're so sure you're right, how can anybody convince you?"

"How could Minna ever hold up her head again?" cried Mrs. Flood. "A father has no *right* to make himself a reproach to his daughter. It would be a disgrace to her not to know where her father was. Whenever your name was mentioned, people would remember and — and it would be an eternal punishment. Minna doesn't deserve that."

"I shall go away in about a week," Zack said, firmly. "I'll not appeal to you, honey, to go with me, I'll not work on your feelings by

saying how lonely I'll be without you, because in all this, I consider your happiness; if you think you'll be happier with Minna —"

"But I can't leave Minna. I know she'll need me."

"Yes — I'm afraid she will. You must think it over carefully, for if you go with me, there'll be no coming back."

"You don't *want* me to go with you!" she cried, despairingly.

At that, Zack lost his composure. The tears rushed to his eyes and he reached out his arms blindly. "Minnie! Minnie! — You're all I have left!"

He was a man who, though uniformly kind, rarely showed tenderness, and at sight of his quivering face, her heart leaped in swift response. "My husband!" she exclaimed brokenly, and was about to throw herself into his arms, when Minna's unhappy face arrested her.

"Poor Minna! We are tearing her heart!" And Mrs. Flood stopped to shed her tears on her daughter's neck.

The next day brought no change in affairs at the Flood farm. Zack was kind and gentle but unalterably determined; his wife was tortured between conflicting emotions; and Minna was beginning to think that if her father really did mean to go away, it might be better for him to go at once. In the evening, a big piece of news came over the telephone. In answer to a long-distance call, Zack found himself in communication with B. M. Gridge.

"Where are you?" asked Zack.

"Still in the city. Say, Zack —"

Zack interrupted: "I'm anxious to have a talk with you, B. M. When can I get the chance?"

"I'll be in Pendleton, Monday. Say, Zack —"

"B. M! — did Mrs. Smith get my telegram about Minna's secret marriage to Jack Palmer?"

"Oh, yes, it came O. K., last night."

"How did Juanita — was Juanita — did she —"

"Oh, it wasn't anything to *Juanita*. Say!

I called you up to tell you the news. About an hour ago, Juanita and I — well, you understand, don't you? Congratulations are in order."

CHAPTER IX

THE THREE DIAMONDS

AS he had intended, Zack Flood went to the city Monday morning. It was two o'clock on the following afternoon when he returned to Pendleton, and half-past two before he found B. M. Gridge at the latter's drygoods store. They had not met since the merchant's hurried marriage, and Zack resigned himself to a few moments of attentive silence while his friend poured forth his enthusiastic tale of happiness. Presently, however, he interposed:

“B. M., where can I talk to you privately?”

The merchant read serious purpose in his friend's face. “Upstairs — come along. I hope everything's all right with you. I thought you looked solemn when you came in the door, but I can't think of anybody's troubles just now. You see, I set my heart on Juanita when she

was nothing but a kid in short dresses. Being double her age and not used to society — a dry old bachelor, nothing but business all my life — and knowing Jack Palmer had his eye on her, and then was engaged to her — seemed I was laboring under serious disadvantages, eh? Look out for these narrow steps. So I says to myself, ‘There’s only one chance for you, old horse, you’ve got to limber up.’ That’s what I done. I went in for these physical stunts and I stretched my muscles and flexed up my ligaments, yes, sir, I limbered up. You look pretty stiff, Zack, you’d better try it, yourself.”

They were upstairs, in a waste of boxed-up goods, where the light came through cobwebbed windows. The ceiling was low, the walls irregular.

“This place’ll do,” Zack said, threading his way to a window, and seating himself upon a long box where there was room for his companion. “B. M., I’ll only keep you a few minutes, but every minute you let me talk will be crowded; for I’ve reached the most important event of my later life.”

The merchant, large, florid, red-mustached, nodded his round, short-cropped head. "We've always stood by each other, Zack, and you know you can depend upon me for whatever you want. But, oh, man!" he laid his hand on the other's shoulder, "she's the prettiest thing God ever made. And she's mine — *mine*, you rascal, do you understand! She loves me. It may not seem becoming in me to say so, but she actually seems half mad with love for me — so excited, she's like a streak of lightning — and *I'm* crazy, too. Wonder what she's doing now? I'll go around to the house pretty soon. . . . Lord, it's come late in life but it's hit hard. Nothing like limbering up. Let me show you how I can walk on my hands —"

But he forgot his great happiness when Zack told him how he meant to go away, perhaps never to return, certainly not for years. "I wouldn't do this, Zack. Of course a man naturally feels like you do, and most men cut up terrible at first when their children act so; but after they come 'round, it's always harder be-

cause they didn't take their medicine. You're *bound* to come 'round in time, you know, fathers and mothers always do, and they just make themselves miserable while they are holding out. When all's said, she's your daughter and you've got to take *him* in — I know how you feel about Jack; when he was engaged to Juanita, *I* felt bad enough about him. But there's no real harm in Jack, you know, and if I were you —"

"Of course," said Zack, quietly, "I didn't come here to discuss all the things you would do. I've come for your help. I can't depend on anybody else in this emergency, but I know you through and through and you're a man I can trust; you're *the* man. We've been through a good deal together and I know you down to your boots. Well, you're going to stand by me, aren't you?"

"Sure! You know it! I know how it'll all end, and I'm only sorry you can't skip to the last chapter without all this unhappiness, for the last chapter's bound to find you and Minna and Jack all making up and living together

happy and contented. But go ahead; what's wanted? "

" I'm going to give Minna a title to one-half of the farm, and Minnie is to have the rest. There's nearly seven hundred acres and that ought to carry them along five or ten years, according to their rate of speed. Of course all I give my wife will go to Minna, and all she has goes to Jack, and all *he* gets —" Zack waved his arm at the upper air. " But it'll take time to eat up *that* much dirt. I want to stay away till the last clod's gone."

" Jack may take an idea to turn industrious."

" He won't be satisfied till it's all gone," said Zack, as if the other had not spoken. " Of course Minna will want to keep him happy, so she'll pour everything into his pocket. When there's nothing left, not even a likely father-in-law, *maybe* he'll hit a few licks, I don't know. But in the meantime, I'm afraid my wife may have a hard time. I had five thousand dollars in the bank but I daren't make it over to her because it would be the same as throwing it at Jack's head. Look at this."

Between them, on the box, he opened a package which until then he had carried in a firm grip.

"Diamonds!" whispered B. M. Gridge in amazement. "What beauties!" He looked quickly about the bare room to make sure no one was listening. The sunlight streaming through the gritty panes, seemed turned to liquid fire as it quivered on the glorious stones.

Zack spoke in a low tone, but without the other's enthusiasm. "This butterfly pin is worth a thousand dollars. This necklace cost two thousand five hundred. This third diamond — the bracelet — came at fifteen hundred."

"Gorgeous!" exclaimed Gridge, his eyes sparkling. "Lord, how they would set off Juanita! I must get her something like that when I can afford it. And if I do as well this year as I did last, by George, I'll fix her up at Christmas! How on earth, Zack, did you come by all these ornaments?"

"All the money I had — except five hundred I mean to carry with me — is in these diamonds.

They are for my wife, and you'll keep them for her —"

"I? Oh, no! This is too great a responsibility."

"You'll keep them for her; and when you find that she is in need, you'll give her first the pin, without letting her know you have any more; then when she gets hard up, give the necklace — as if you had just received it from me but without knowing where it came from; as a last resort, give her the third diamond. She can easily convert any of them into cash, and if she wants to keep her money in this form, it would be convenient. Whenever you give her a piece, do it without her daughter or Jack knowing. Of course, she'll tell 'em. But that will be her doing."

"Zack, have you lost your mind? You are *not* going away!"

"I am going away; Minnie refuses to go with me, so I mean to provide for her the best I can."

"But how can I tell when she *is* hard up?"

"As soon as she turns over her land to

Minna, you might give her the pin because she'll be in a tight fix then. And afterwards, just keep your eyes open."

"I can't have such valuable jewels about — I'd always be afraid —"

"The bank will keep them for you; put 'em in your strong box. Here!" He closed the box and laid it upon Gridge's knee. "I don't ask your promise. If I had to depend on promises, I'd be afraid to undertake it. I know you as I know myself. And I can't be uneasy about Minnie's welfare while you're provided to help her. Nobody knows this but you and me. If the worst doesn't happen — if my wife keeps her land, and remains independent, just retain the diamonds for — for say, ten years, when I may or may not turn up to claim them; if I don't come back within ten years you can conclude I'm dead. In that case, of course, you'll turn 'em over to my wife."

"By George! Zack, you come here when I'm as happy as a schoolboy, and you take all the pleasant taste out of my mouth. There's no sense in your going away. . . . Well, I'll

give you a receipt for these things, I won't accept 'em without giving a regular receipt describing 'em in full." Then his tone of reluctance was fused with eagerness: "I don't see how you can even imagine leaving Mrs. Flood after all these years. Juanita and I have been man and wife only a few days, but I can feel it's for always — I know it would be as impossible for me to leave her at the end of half a century as at this very second. Love is for eternity and you'll be miserable away from your farm; what's more, your wife will be miserable without you — why, Zack, how can she hold up her head after you've — I don't like to say the word . . ."

Zack put his hands before his face, and Gridge, not understanding, stared at the motionless figure in silence. For a few moments the room was so still, nothing could be heard but the gnawing of a distant mouse. Then the tall wiry form quivered, and a single sob escaped the strained throat. It sounded so helpless, so at variance with the resolute spirit of the man, that Gridge felt unreasonably ashamed for hav-

ing heard it, as if he had pried into the secret soul of his friend, producing agony by his clumsy touch.

Zack started up, making a determined effort at self-control. "Nobody will understand me," he said, brokenly. "I knew that. Nobody will be blamed but myself. I can bear it. God knows the worst I suffer is from fearing how it must be with my wife. But I can't stay here." He clenched his fists unconsciously, and his blue eyes flashed with quick light that seemed to come and go and dart again. "B. M., you're about my age. You know what it is to begin life over — you're doing that with Juanita. Would you tell me that my life has ended? But, oh, you can't see — nobody can! It can't be helped." His voice grew steady once more. "You understand about the diamonds, don't you?"

Gridge nodded. "Come below and I'll write out the receipt."

"Nonsense! what do I care for that? Very well, since you'll feel better. And, yes, another thing, B. M.: there's Richard Warding

— my niece. She has nothing on earth except what she gets from us. It may be after I'm gone, she'll come to hard lines. I don't want my sister's child to have to work for her daily bread. Look out for her. If she's thrown on the world without anything, count her in with my wife, sell part of the diamonds and give her something to keep her on her feet. You'll know how much to give without taking too much from my wife. In that case you'll have to convert the jewels to money — everything is in your power. Old man — give me your hand."

The merchant extended his hand and the farmer held it close, looking fixedly into the unwavering eyes. In the tense silence, good faith was not asked, but taken for granted. Presently, still holding his hand, Zack said with deep emotion, "Thank God for such a friend!"

Then they went downstairs, silent once more, and the receipt was written and given; still without words. There was another handclasp at the store door, then Zack unfastened his horse and rode away without looking back.

The merchant watched till the horseman had disappeared far down the country road leading out of Pendleton.

As Zack rode across the pasture toward his yard, he turned aside on catching sight of the flutter of a dress down by the branch. It was Richard, slowly walking in the shade of the trees, her eyes on the ever-changing lights and shades of the stream. The news of the secret marriage had been spread abroad. An account of it under the title "Muffled Marriage Bells" had appeared in the county paper written with a lightness of touch to insure the future good will of the "high contracting parties." This Richard knew, but as yet she had had no intimation of her uncle's purpose. So grave and quiet had been his demeanor since the annual picnic that she was unable to decide whether or not he had taken the marriage as a severe blow; and but for the fact that he no longer joked and laughed according to his daily wont, she might have thought him altogether unmoved. Certainly he was as different as possible from any outraged father that might have filled a

noisy part in one of her impetuously-wrought stories.

Zack checked his horse at her side. "Are you happy, my dear?" he asked, as he thoughtfully stroked the animal's arching neck.

Richard smiled up at him. "The world is so beautiful," she said.

He stared out over the farm that seemed a part of his very spirit. Meadow, pasture, field, pond, grove, stream, ravine, sloping hillside and soft-curving hollow — beautiful indeed, scenes of his young love, his proud fatherhood!

He found himself unable to speak of it, the mere thought was too vast, too profound. "Alfred Montgomery has gone off to law-college," he said, aimlessly. "Fine fellow. I'd trust Alf with my very life. You like him, don't you, dear?"

Her face burned as she turned aside her head, but he was unheeding. "Oh — yes!"

"I'm glad you are friends. People need all the friends they can accumulate on their way through this neck of the woods — meaning

Life, Richard." He smiled wistfully. "Well, I must go on to the house. But I wanted to tell you —" He stopped perplexed by the difficulty of making her understand.

She turned toward him, trustfully.

"If you're ever in need, dear, when I'm not at hand to help you, don't think I ran away without making some provision for your welfare. You'll understand, later on, what I'm talking about. Don't ever imagine you were forgotten. I've talked this all over with a man I know I can trust as I trust myself; I've placed the means in his hands to be turned over to you in case you're ever in want." He paused, while she looked at him in wondering silence, her eyes opened wide.

He wanted to tell her that he had provided in like manner for his wife. He was withheld by the conviction that if *she* knew of any treasure in reserve, she would feel an immediate need of it. With a deep sigh, he turned the horse sharply, and rode away.

"He must have meant Alfred," thought Richard.

CHAPTER X

THE DIAMOND BUTTERFLY

RICHARD'S confession of love had at first only dazed Alfred Montgomery; but as time passed, he became conscious of a decided change in his mental attitude toward both her and himself. If he had not then been hopelessly in love with Minna Flood, his feeling for Richard might have taken the course of tender regret or even tender liking. With all his heart given to Minna, nothing was left Richard but the surprise of a disconcerted mind, and the uneasiness of emotions unable to respond to sudden demand. To be sure, Richard, in declaring herself, had made it plain that she expected no return, her kiss was given on the understanding that he was going away "forever"—that is to say, for a year; but whatever she expected, the fact remained that there was a void in her

heart — an acknowledged void — which could only be filled by him, yet which he could not fill.

Being thus pushed to the wall by the conviction that he could never meet conditions, Alfred felt aggrieved, even hurt, as if he had been thrown in the wrong. His love for Minna died so sudden, so violent a death — the discovery that she was married to Jack Palmer at the very time he was pouring out his soul to her proved the mortal blow — that if Richard's confession had come later, everything might have been different. As it was, although amazedly aware of the fact that Minna (Mrs. Palmer!) was no more to him than any other woman, she seemed, like a cold ghost, always standing between him and Richard.

Richard was just a girl, anyway — a mere child. She had a way of looking you in the eye as if she would always mean what she meant to-day — she would perhaps go on loving him to the end of the chapter. That was the trouble. And he felt she was not the sort of woman he could ever love. It had been a great relief to confide in her all his fears and

hopes — she was born to be told about one's love for somebody else — but suddenly to force herself forward as a principal in the play was as if the Chorus should mutiny and capture the entire stage. She was not only a child, but a dreamer, a writer about other folk. It was too bad that she should decide to be a real person.

Under the circumstances, Alfred thought it best not to spend the next year's vacation at home. There is nothing so good for disappointed love as starving the eye, and he was determined that Richard's cure should be complete — accordingly he spent all summer in the Ozarks hoping he was doing the little girl good by his absence, and certain he was improving his health by months spent under the open sky. As his skin bronzed under the glowing sun and his muscles toughened in fishing and long walking expeditions, there was a corresponding strengthening of the soul-ligaments — a gain in confidence verging toward assurance. He owed this spirit of potential conquest to Richard. However he might shrink from her,

she had taught him to be much better pleased with himself; he could be loved.

Between Alfred and his step-mother existed a friendship most delicately poised. While it stood, it was perfect, and in order for it to stand, he took the greatest care to stop up all crevices before she discovered them. Mrs. Montgomery, the Second, was so anxious for her husband's son to like her, that she was always afraid he wouldn't, while he, eager to show the sincerity of his regard went three miles out of his way when she required only one. That is why she learned about Richard.

That Alfred should stay away from the farm an entire summer, thus making his absence last two years, was so unheard-of, nothing but the clearest explanation could satisfy Mrs. Montgomery. To talk about health down in the Ozarks was absurd — wasn't there plenty of health on the Pendleton acres? Wasn't it that Alfred had learned at the university to discredit his humble neighbors, his hard-working father, his sensitive step-mother? Hadn't his

education struck in, to destroy the simplicity of boyhood's content?

Alfred, knowing how these suspicions would arise and flourish, determined to nip them in the bud. Under conditions of inviolable secrecy — the letter must be burned the instant it was read — he wrote to his step-mother: Richard was in love with him — had told him so — was a girl of fixed ideas, and would not easily banish this romantic attachment — it was best for him to wait another year before seeing her — by that time she would doubtless be healed of her malady.

In a way, it hurt Alfred to write this letter — the face of Richard seemed looking its reproach from the shadows beyond his desk, and in those great dark eyes he discovered something that made him feel half ashamed. But the temptation to tell the truth was simply irresistible. Everybody knew he had courted Minna and had been rejected; that was as much a matter of history in Pendleton as if he had proposed to her at the opera-house in the full

glare of the footlights. Naturally it would be concluded that his staying away was because of a broken heart — he wanted his step-mother to know different, and he knew she would appreciate the compliment of his confidence. He even believed that she would keep the secret. And besides, she would know that somebody could love him. It seemed to make him larger, the writing of that letter.

Mrs. Montgomery faithfully burned the epistle, not even showing it to her husband. As to repeating its contents, she was incapable of such bad faith. Of course she told Juanita Gridge, but that was because she knew she could trust Juanita. She could not let Juanita imagine that Alfred was staying away from home on account of Minna. Juanita understood Minna so well — she would be glad to know that not every man in the county was a fool about her! Alfred didn't care *that* for Minna; the secret marriage had cured him in a day — but you see, poor little Richard . . .

Juanita saw; and the clearer she saw, the more impossible it was for her to keep silent

when rumor spread abroad that Alfred, still hopelessly in love with his old sweetheart, had not the heart to risk meeting her again. Minna's designs upon Jack Palmer had proved successful, but just as Mrs. Montgomery had said, it did not follow that every man was a fool. Juanita certainly hoped Jack had never regretted his choice, though sometimes she feared it, and now that she was so happy in B. M. Gridge and his station and fortune, she would like to have known if Jack were really happy with Minna. But there was no use for people to imagine that Alfred was pining away for Minna, as if she were some enchantress blighting every life that came in her way. The fact was, Alfred had learned that — but you would never guess! . . .

When Alfred came home, at the end of two years, he was greatly changed — no longer awkward or cadaverous, no longer shrinking or setting too low an estimate on his abilities, he exhibited a serenity, a quiet mastery of himself — was more manly in every way. Already he saw his way clear to cheating the clammy clutch

of constitutional ill-health. The knowledge that he had been loved, might be loved again, had put firm ground under his long, thin legs. Moreover his university life impressed him with the general inferiority of Pendleton society — gave him such a satisfactory estimate of his own qualities that he was happy to the point of breaking out in song. All his life he had been a slave to the Minna-ideal, but now, in perfect freedom, he was anxious to encounter Minna in the flesh to discover, if possible, why he had ever loved her. He had bowed down to an image made by his own hands; since that had been hurled in the dust, he might find out what the real Minna was like.

As soon as Alfred had renewed intimacies with his father's farm, duty called him to visit his old friends. Above all, there was Richard — she would expect him, alas! with too tender an interest, he feared. However that might be, he must go; but one thing was certain, he would not risk seeing her alone. At the store he spoke of it to B. M. Gridge, his father's intimate friend.

"I must go out to the Flood farm . . . but I don't like to go there by myself . . . the ride is too lonesome . . . and besides . . ."

"I'm going, this evening," said the merchant. "Seen Juanita, yet?"

"No."

"Suppose you go up to the house and see her; I'll be there in about half an hour with the buggy and we'll drive out to Palmers'—you see, we don't call it the *Flood* farm any more."

"Has Mr. Zack Flood been heard from since he disappeared?"

Gridge hesitated. "The fact is, I'm going out to the farm this afternoon on Zack's account. He has something for me to give his wife—it's a very handsome diamond—a butterfly pin, easily worth a thousand dollars."

Alfred was astonished. "Do you mean he has sent this to you?"

"Fact is, I'm not at liberty to explain just how I got it. Anyway, I don't know where Zack is, he hasn't revealed that."

"It shows, at least, that he's still alive—and cares for his wife."

The other did not answer. It would comfort Mrs. Flood to think so, and after all, it might be true.

"You are looking well," Alfred declared, wondering for the thousandth time how dainty little Juanita could have fallen in love with him so suddenly, and telling himself, as he had often done, that if it hadn't been suddenly, it could never have been. Gridge had grown redder of face and louder of breathing, and he filled up so much room, his boots creaked so maddeningly! Alfred gazed in mute admiration; it was like taking a study in Hope to look at him. If Juanita could love a man so suggestive of beef and newspapers, what might not happen?

"Well!" echoed Gridge, going with him to the door but keeping an eye on a clerk who had half a mind to sit down, "why, I'm as spry as a boy! I'll never be old, for it's all as you have a mind about it, and I'm as strong as an ox. I credit most of it to my physical exercises — always stand on one foot of a morning as I draw my sock on the other, and take a

turn about the room walking on my hands, limbering up. Ah, my boy, get married if you want to see life double. Don't wait as long as I did, unless you've the prospect of nabbing such a high stepper as the woman I got. She was worth waiting for — never were two people of the same mind brought together like us — what she wants I want, and what I want she puts up with . . . and she's the prettiest woman in Pendleton. You just go out there and see if she isn't. She's all for society and I'm all for business, and we keep out of each other's sphere. As long as I can make the money to keep her going, the clock strikes regular. I'm in pretty deep right now, because I've laid out to build her the finest residence in Pendleton, but I'll get on my feet again when the holiday trade comes in."

If Alfred had expected to see Juanita more or less coarsened by association with B. M. Gridge, he was agreeably surprised. He found her dressed to entertain the Ladies' Card Club of Pendleton whose hour was almost at hand, and the effect of her dainty white dress, her

little white slippers and her skin-colored stockings which a providential fashion revealed in generous perspective, soothed him as with a cool touch. She had all the archness, the gaiety, the solemn airs of two years ago which her diminutive form rendered charmingly amusing. Alfred made an effort to picture her perched upon the edge of her bed, or looking from snowy pillows while B. M. Gridge stood on one foot to draw on the other sock — but it was impossible. Looking at Juanita, he could not see her husband.

“You are not at all interrupting my plans,” she assured him. “I have nothing to do but wait for the ladies, and there’s always time for an old friend.” She found him wonderfully improved, but like everybody else, she considered him the same Alfred Montgomery who had always depreciated himself. Having been taken at his own original valuation, he would never be marked higher in the popular estimation of that community. Fortunately Alfred’s new-fledged self-respect was strong enough to soar alone. The very fact that Juanita never

once troubled herself to find out how far the rocking chair had separated her skirt-ruffles from her feet, showed that Alfred "didn't matter." During the conversation, he received the impression that B. M. Gridge "mattered" as little. Jack Palmer was a sort of home base from which most of her thoughts described circles. As she showed no embarrassment in speaking of him, his farm, his wife, his plans — she knew all his plans — of course it was all right. Two years with B. M. Gridge should have safely insulated her from any current of electrical disturbance. Alfred was far enough away from his infatuation for Minna to understand how very dead a dead love may be. Still, Jack *had* been engaged to Juanita, and there seemed a little — just a little — too much Jack in the whole conversation.

"Jack's going to move to town as soon as his house is built," she said, gazing out the window. "He's bought the lot next ours on the *only* street in Pendleton — it'll be a race between him and Mr. Gridge, whose house'll be built first. Jack is to build a very expensive

mansion. I don't think ours will make a bad showing, however," she smiled.

Alfred, following the direction of her eyes, admired the distant woods and pasturelands where, at the annual picnic, he had parted from Minna with heart so sad. Now that he cared nothing for Minna, he felt a sentimental attachment for the scene of their parting. He waved at the lovely view:

"Won't it hurt you to leave all this?"

Juanita shrugged her shoulders. "It's too much like the horrid country," she explained, "and in winter, it's fearfully dismal. Jack Palmer says he can't stand his farm any longer — it's sold — he sold his half and Mrs. Flood sold hers so it could all go together. Society will be pretty lively next season, I imagine."

"Will Mrs. Flood enjoy living in town? She has always lived out there —"

"Oh, she likes it wherever Minna is, she's so blindly wrapped up in her daughter. But of course it won't *suit* her — I don't know what they *will* do with Mrs. Flood, she has headaches or something and is so uncertain in

company — people and things remind her of her husband and it keeps her from being cheerful. It's not very amusing, you know, when everybody else is disposed to gaiety. Of course one can't exactly *blame* her for being droopy, but we feel that she might do like Richard."

Alfred felt uncomfortable at the name just as he always did at the thought of the one who loved him,—uncomfortable, yet inquiring. "Richard?" he repeated; "and how does she do?"

"Lives in the back rooms — refuses to see anybody — hides. Never goes anywhere, or comes into the parlor, and that sort of thing. She *says* she's an author but there hasn't been a book. Her uncle must have been crazy to go away as he did, and I guess she's got something the matter with her mind to keep her shut up that way — a sort of family strain. Now, why can't Mrs. Flood imitate her? She could have her nice quiet rooms at the back of the house with her books and embroidery and her nice view from the windows and all that . . . but no! She has the notion that Minna *wants* her

to be present at her dances and card-parties, and present she *is*, a perfect martyr, trying to look pleased, but on the verge of tears half the time.— Of course Minna can't tell her that she oughtn't to distress herself that way — Jack
* feels so sorry about it. As long as Mrs. Flood *can't* forget how her husband's done, she ought to keep retired, don't you know? Minna fills the house with young people that her mother couldn't understand, and if she'd keep out of their way it would be perfectly all right. Well, it's pretty hard on Jack — and Minna — out *there*; but when they have their town house, goodness knows what they *will* do! ”

When Alfred was being driven out of town, he said to B. M. Gridge, “ Mrs. Gridge tells me that Richard is — er — ”

“ That's right,” observed the merchant, “ just about the prettiest girl in the county.”

Alfred opened his eyes. “ Who? ”

“ Didn't you say Richard? ”

“ Yes, but I was only going to say. . . . Look here, B. M., what do you mean? Richard is the last girl to set up for good looks —

dark and thin and bony and wide-eyed. . . . Mighty fine girl, and bright as you please, but *pretty*? Why, that little girl is absolutely plain, yes, and I might use a harder word than that."

"Richard's no little girl," retorted Gridge, amused. "And she's not thin, or bony. You must remember she's eighteen years old; she was a sort of spindling bud the last time you saw her, but let me tell you, she's bloomed since then. She's prettier than ever Minna was, for there's more sense in her good looks. Minna wasn't anything *but* pretty. That was all she could do."

Alfred laughed. "Either you are blind, or there's been a miracle on the Flood farm. But we can soon settle the question."

"I don't know whether you can or not. It's not easy to see Richard."

"She'll see me." It was impossible to restrain that boastful word.

"Maybe so. But it's not her custom. She just ups and says she won't come down, even when she's asked for, and that's not often.

And it sorter suits Minna, I do believe. Minna isn't as good looking, somehow, when Richard comes in the room."

Alfred began to find himself strangely interested. "Of course it's been a long time since I saw her — and it seems impossible — but she was a very bright girl and a good friend of mine. I'll have to scold her for avoiding society; that isn't right. And if she's as pretty as you think, why should she bury herself? I don't like that." He was a trifle indignant.

Gridge laughed. "Going to scold her, eh? Well, here's the Palmers' farm — do you know, it's just been sold, the last foot of it? Yes! Biggest piece of news this year! — Going to scold Richard? Come, that's mighty funny to me. If you lay eyes on her this summer, consider yourself lucky!"

CHAPTER XI

AN ORIENTAL LADY

IN spite of his eagerness to see Richard — that he might scold her — Alfred thought it best to stay in the buggy until B. M. Gridge should have delivered the diamond ornament; to this proposal, however, the merchant decidedly objected. He was as anxious to have some one at hand during the presentation, as had been Alfred to have a spectator during his expected meeting with his old friend. Mrs. Flood would naturally ask many questions which Gridge would be unable to answer and, altogether, he faced the situation with deep uneasiness.

They found Mrs. Flood alone. Minna had gone to the Ladies' Card Club meeting at Juanita Gridge's, and Jack was in the city. She was so sorry Minna was not at home — of course

she supposed Alfred had come solely to see the one for whom his heart was broken. There was a tenderness, a motherly caress in her tone, her look, as she enfolded him in affectionate regard. Any one who appreciated Minna had the secret clew to her heart — and this fine, tall young man with his grave air that gave distinction, with his direct look that spoke an open soul — it seemed a pity that his life should be ruined; but of course he couldn't help loving her daughter, for everybody loved her. His heart would never be healed. Mrs. Flood would have thought less of it were it otherwise, but she would do all she could to console.

Alfred found her greatly changed. It was not so much that her hair was fast turning gray, or that her form was thin, her face pallid, but rather that her movements indicated the consciousness of age. She had evidently accepted her daughter's opinion that she belonged to the past, and in the past she lived. She talked about Minna most of the time, and it was only in those little pauses that come when thoughts fail to overlap, that the deep sadness

of her eyes looked forth; sometimes, a trivial word would provoke unshed tears.

Thus, when Alfred, with a smile told how he had surprised his father after his two years' absence, how his father had seen him coming across the meadow and had started toward him on the run with a shout that made the pigs seek their troughs and the cows start toward the back lot:

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Flood, suddenly bowing her head in her hands.

She was so fragile, so helpless, so pitiful, Alfred could have put his arms about her neck to implore her be of good courage, just as she could have laid her transparent hand upon his head to beg him not grieve too much. She would never have let him see the tears in her mournful eyes, had she known him emancipated from Minna's tyranny. Deceived, she opened to him her heart of hearts — "My sorrow, also, is lifelong," she seemed to say.

B. M. Gridge produced the diamond butterfly. No one could possibly have done the thing worse. With his blundering clumsiness, his

desperate effort to tell no more than should be told, he made a sort of rampart for the concealment of Mrs. Flood's emotion. By the time he had ended explaining that there was nothing to explain, she had back her pensive air of submission to destiny.

In truth she could not exult in this proof of her husband's thoughtfulness. Why should he send diamond butterflies to her, and not one word of forgiveness to their only child? It was poor Minna who needed assurance of his love, not she who never doubted it, even despite his cruel absence. Wherever he was, she could not think him changed to her, but poor Minna often said that her father no longer loved her. Mrs. Flood held the gem somewhat shrinkingly, as if her tired eyes were not equal to its radiance. Already she saw that pin sparkling on Minna's bosom. And why not? *She* had no use for ornaments — diamonds are for the young, and the gift would bring to Minna's eyes the love always in her heart, though sometimes fast asleep. Once more in life, Minna

would be given something from both father and mother.

It was strange to see the tears slipping down those thin cheeks while not the quiver of a muscle hinted at weeping. Gridge felt a fierce desire to lay hands on Zack Flood — his greetings would have been very far from affectionate, could they have met.

As yet, not a word had been said about Richard; Alfred now asked to see her. Change of ideas brought relief to all three.

“Didn’t Mr. Gridge tell . . . ?” Mrs. Flood shook her head with gentle regret.

“But I’m sure she’ll see me,” Alfred said, confidently. “If you will tell her who it is — and how much I’d like to renew our acquaintance.”

Mrs. Flood departed on her mission, not hopefully.

Gridge rose.

“I’m not going yet,” Alfred explained, decidedly.

“Oh, yes, you are,” his friend returned with

a good-natured grin. "We've imposed on Mrs. Flood long enough — she'd like to be alone to think over what's happened."

"I'm going to have a talk with Richard."

Mrs. Flood returned. "She asks to be excused."

Alfred suddenly grew uncomfortably red. "Mrs. Flood, it's not right for a young girl like Richard to make a hermit of herself. I shall tell her so, and I'll find the opportunity!"

When outside, he added to Gridge, "Guess a letter'll get to her!" The day before, he had been afraid he would have to meet Richard, now he feared the meeting might not take place. That he had been told of her marvelously developed beauty could have nothing to do with his desire, though if she were really pretty, he'd like to know it; but he meant to act for her good — he must rescue her from such unheard-of morbidity. Duty urged him to push Richard out among her fellowmen, and he did not mean to falter in this self-imposed obligation.

However, his letter must not command.

He wrote, asking permission to call on her the following Friday evening.

“MY DEAR MR. MONTGOMERY,” was her reply, “I have a very pressing engagement for Friday evening that will prevent the renewing of our acquaintance. Please accept my best wishes for a happy summer at home. You are so far behind in the pleasures of Pendleton life, it must crowd your days to catch up, and the months will be gone before you know it. I hope everything will conspire to make it a vacation long to be remembered. You express uneasiness lest my health may not be so good as when I last saw you, and first I must thank you for so friendly an interest, then assure you that I never felt better in my life. Yes, it *is* too bad that I could not see you the day of your visit at the house, but I dare not invite you to try some other day lest I should be obliged to send down my excuses. If we should not meet this summer, be assured that you will carry back to the university my heartiest wishes for your success.”

At least, it was with a friendly smile that she closed the door in his face. Alfred knocked again, and somewhat louder. The result — her second note:

“MY DEAR MR. MONTGOMERY: I have just taken your letter from our box, and have stopped at the Spring to answer it — that explains, and I hope excuses, the use of a lead-pencil. I know I should go up to the house and be proper with pen and ink, but the afternoon is so glorious and I worked so hard this morning at my desk that I can't bear to shut myself up from birds and sunshine and above all, the brook-murmurings. I feel first-cousin to Out-of-doors. It's so good of you to want to see me that I can't thank you enough for your interest; and you are so anxious about my welfare, so afraid I am losing the best out of life by 'living as a hermit' that you would 'do anything to change my habits,' and I appreciate all this disinterested kindness. I do wish I could repay it even in part, and I know I must seem horribly selfish to accept so much consid-

eration and not seem to give any in return. But, no, I just can't see you next Thursday because on that day I have an engagement that will not permit me to be 'visible.' If you had said Wednesday — but, now that I think of it, Wednesday would have been just as unfortunate. I seem placed in the ridiculous aspect of an oriental lady whom it is impossible to visit — if I were you I should simply give me up, I am sure I deserve it!

“Hoping you are getting all out of your vacation that your heart could desire —

“Sincerely yours,

“R. W.”

“Very well,” exclaimed Alfred, on reading this communication, “then *be* an ‘oriental lady!’” And for two weeks he made no sign to any one that he was aware of R. W.’s existence. But it did not make it easier for him that in all that time nobody else pronounced her name. He was always wanting to hear something about her; but though he led the conversation to the Flood farm, though he dis-

cussed the approaching removal of the family — they would have to board in town until Jack Palmer's mansion was built — nobody thought of Richard. Even his step-mother's mind seemed a blank in her direction.

One night, at a party given by the Gridges, he suddenly exploded from his long silence — he was seated on a divan with Minna, and for some time had been slightly bewildered by the flatness of "old times" as she served them up from memory; he had the heartiest good-will to relish those morsels from the past, but alas! the sauce of sentiment was not there, and every "Do you remember . . .?" seemed cooked in the same dish.

He asked, with ill-smothered resentment, "What *are* all those engagements that keep Richard from ever seeing a fellow?"

Minna laughed gaily. "Engagements!" Evidently there were none.

"But I want to see her!" Alfred cried. "And I want to see her all the more because she keeps putting me off."

"Oh! You want to see her?" Minna was

charmingly grave. Alfred found her characteristics more strongly marked. She was prettier than ever, she was more difficult in conversation. He had the odd fancy that sometimes she set her face shining, then went away and left it — like a lamp in an empty room. Perhaps she did not find it fitting that, after declaring his love was his life, he should be interested in any Richards.

“Yes, and I must see her — I’m tantalized just as if she were a sort of mystery crying for solution. She must have engagements, she was so explicit about them, and she was always a perfectly truthful girl.”

Minna smiled because she was not listening. Jack, as big and handsome as ever, sat beside Juanita, his jolly laugh ringing above the hum of many voices. Evidently Minna was over there on that same divan — right between her husband and Mr. Gridge’s wife. Juanita’s arm touched his coat — little arm so white and slender, faintly blushing at the elbow! — Minna looked down at her own rounded, exquisitely-curved whiteness tapering to an elbow

that could look anybody in the face. What could Jack see in that little creature to make his eyes so bright? That is what Minna never had understood. She knew Juanita not only from her toes to her deceptive hair, but all the inner parts of her; and she knew Jack from his love of a good dinner and a peaceful smoke, to his ecstasy over music—any sort of music, even to the marking of time on a snare-drum. But Juanita-and-Jack, she did not know. Judging from their ill-advised engagement and its swift breaking-off, neither did they.

“I’m going to give a Good-by-to-the-Farm Dance,” said Minna, withdrawing her thoughts from the other side of the room. “You ought to have a chance, then, if you are so anxious to see Richard. Everybody’ll be invited, and possibly among such a crowd, she may condescend to show herself.”

Alfred offered excuses, finding her tone vaguely reproachful. “You know, Richard and I were such good friends, once. . . . I don’t like to go away without seeing her.”

“ Yes — it is thought she has improved, in looks.”

“ Is she really pretty, though ? ”

Minna reflected. “ But I could never judge of that type,” she finally confessed. “ Anyway, nobody finds fault with her looks. It’s her — but she was always very queer. It seems such a pity, for in some ways she is really bright.”

As the result of this conversation, Alfred wrote once more to Richard, and in reply received his third note :

“ No, your five-paged letter did not seem at all too long, dwelling as it did upon the incidents and memories of two years ago. Most of these occurrences and bits of conversation have been so long forgotten by me that it was like getting acquainted with myself again and I am surprised more and more that you should remember. The recollection of my first days on coming to this farm, then so strange a place, have been blurred and overcrowded by succeeding years. More distinctly than anything else

I remember our first meeting on the station-platform, to which you refer. . . . What will you think when I tell you that just at these dots, I went to perch upon my trunk — the very trunk where you first found me — and said to myself very commandingly, and then very entreatingly, ‘BE a little girl again!’ But I could not be, even for one moment. One day I woke up to look out the window and oh, how strange it was! I had been carried out of girlhood. When one is a child, one finds almost within one’s reach, tickets to all sorts of destinations — to wealth and fame, principally; but there’s one kind of ticket never, never found in the borderlands of youth — the return-ticket. Good-by — I think I hear my train whistling now, getting ready to carry me farther and farther away from the days you write about.

“ R. W.

“ P. S. Oh, about that Good-by-to-the-Farm Dance, to be given here by Minna: it makes me so sad to think of leaving this dear, dear place that I couldn’t possibly dance to celebrate the mournful event, so I will not be downstairs

on the festive night. I thank you for wanting the first two dances with me, and may as well explain that I don't know how to dance, and never expect to learn. I don't *want* to do it, which is perhaps an out-cropping of my well-known queerness. Ah, I see you anticipated that, but no, I *couldn't* sit out the dances with you. It would almost kill me to *sit out* anything, and it would make me hate my partner — my fellow-prisoner in dull captivity. You wouldn't want the hate of

“The Little Oriental Lady.”

Alfred put his three notes together, read them one after the other, sought to extract the essence of the collection. Taken in connection with the fact that Richard would not see him, what did the friendliness, the simplicity, the frankness of the style signify? Was she practicing on him, thus perfecting her manner as an author? To Alfred, only one thing was definitely certain — he wanted to see her more after her second note than her first, much more after her third than her second. If the corre-

spondence continued, he would surely grow desperate with vague longings, yet it must continue as the only means of bringing her to him, though she come only on paper.

He went to the Good-by-to-the-Farm Dance from social duty; he staid as long as he must, in a state of marked melancholy. The filmy dresses, the bright faces, the merry voices, the orchestral sighs all reminded him of Richard, hidden somewhere upstairs no doubt, lonely, yet determined — the little hermitess! Sometimes he was indignant because she treated him so, and declared he would make no further efforts to see her, would live henceforth as if she had no existence. Then he remembered that she treated him no worse than she did the rest of the world, and was filled with pity for her strange obstinacy. Then he wondered why he should so eagerly wish to see her, after staying away so long lest they meet; and then the desire grew fiercer not according to logic but nature, and he told himself see her he would in spite of everything — meaning in spite of herself — cruel little “Oriental Lady”!

He observed that her absence from the parlors was taken quietly, as a matter of course, by all the guests. A few made a faint show of regret that she should be so retiring in all her ways, but nobody showed surprise. They had grown so accustomed to her isolation that they could hardly have understood Alfred's rebellious mood. One young man ventured in a guarded whisper that if Richard had come down, she would have been by far the most beautiful woman present—"Woman!" thought Alfred, with an impatient shrug.

If the young man were right, who could blame the rest of the women for being interested in something else? And certainly, there was something else to brighten their eyes, and awaken pangs, or enthusiasm—it was the first public appearance of the diamond butterfly.

How it sparkled on Minna's bosom! Her mother was so proud that she took half a step backward from old age. Never a movement, a toss of the little head or bend of the perfect arm, escaped that mother's eye which brightened with every smile that flitted across the

daughter's face. And when Minna said something to make people laugh, Mrs. Flood bent and waved like a tall flower stirred in a happy breeze. When Minna floated to the delicious strains into the bright remoteness of the back parlor, Mrs. Flood sent a thousand little thoughts and cares to attend her like fluttering sprites to ward off evil. And when she was lost from sight, Mrs. Flood talked about her to any one who would listen. If the world had not been created for Minna, Mrs. Flood was very much mistaken; what place in it, then, for Richard?

Juanita, however, did not believe the world had been created for Minna; and finding her husband out in the moonlight, smoking his cigar and wishing it time to go home, she intimated as much. Juanita might have passed a delightful evening, for she had danced oftener with her host than with any one else, and Jack Palmer, though fat, was wonderfully light of foot — ordinarily it would have been a night to dream about; but there was that diamond but-

terfly. Juanita naturally supposed it a gift from Jack to his wife, for Mrs. Flood had not cared to stir up discussion regarding her husband — that always seemed like a reproach to Minna. Of course Jack had a right to give his wife what he pleased; but B. M. Gridge had never given Juanita a diamond butterfly. Did Jack care more for his wife than —

“You bet he don’t!” declared the merchant, throwing away his cigar. “Why, Juanita, little one, you know how I worship you, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do —”

“You’ve never given me diamond butterflies,” with an adorable pout that made him want to kiss her even in front of the brilliant windows.

“I’ll give you a dozen of them when I can afford it. Just now that new house calls for every penny I can spare —”

“Jack is building a new house, too, and *he* can spare enough pennies to make *his* wife happy —” The little creature looked so like a child, and spoke so like a child, that her hus-

band was lost in admiration. She was so unsophisticated, anybody could tell just what she was thinking!

He said, benignly, "You wouldn't love me more if I gave you diamonds, I hope."

"But I would know you loved me more," she murmured, ingenuously.

He laughed — the transparent little rascal! If he could have explained that Jack knew nothing of that diamond-pin — but no, since Mrs. Flood had kept silent, he was afraid to venture on explanations of any sort; if you gave Juanita the tiniest end between her fingers, she had a way of pulling out the entire thread, no matter with what damage to the fabric.

Suddenly Gridge had an idea. How it had come he did not know; doubtless it was evolved by the languorous music from within, the moonlight that bathed the meadows and flecked the gravel walks with silver dots, the nearness of Juanita's coaxing face, the perfume of her hair, the starry sparkling of her eyes.

"Well, little wife, shall we give a Farewell-to-the-Old-Home Masked Ball, and put you in

the middle of it with a diamond necklace about that lovely neck? ”

“ I’d be ashamed to have anything cheaper than Minna’s butterfly.”

“ Suppose we say a necklace twice as costly, eh? That will rather put a spoke in Minna’s wheel, don’t you think? ”

“ How you talk, Mr. Gridge! It isn’t because I want anything better than *she* has, but because I don’t like to believe that you think less of me than . . . than you ought to think.”

“ All right — that’s decided; I’ll think of you in a two-thousand-five-hundred-dollar diamond necklace, at your next party, and then it’ll be Jack’s move! ”

Two thousand five hundred dollars was the estimate Zack Flood had placed upon the diamond necklace left in Gridge’s care for Mrs. Flood. In fact it was this very necklace which Gridge had determined to give Juanita. And why not, after all? Flood had given him the alternative of selling the diamonds if necessary; Gridge would charge the value against himself. Whenever he was

able, he would give the money to Mrs. Flood, and in the meantime, Juanita might as well enjoy the necklace. It was doing no good in that strong box at the bank.

CHAPTER XII

THE MASKED BALL

THE masked party which presently became the talk of Pendleton, was the last to be given in B. M. Gridge's ancestral home. The Flood farm, or, as it was now called, the Palmer farm, had passed into alien hands, and the Palmers were boarding at the big Pendleton Hotel. After the masked party, the Gridges would also stay at this hotel, a three-story brick, much too large for Pendleton, at once the pride of the town and the despair of its owners. The Palmers and Gridges would be like a family-party under that imposing roof; they would lend a certain dignity hitherto unattained by flitting strangers,—not a dignity of restraint or solemnity, but a gay, proper dignity, a social dignity. Juanita and Minna were recognized as the rival queens of society, and the day they determined to pa-

tronize Pendleton Hotel until their mansions should be built, that day Pendleton Hotel became fashionable.

All guests to the masked party were warned to come so artfully disguised that identification would be as difficult as possible. There were, of course, prizes, for no Pendleton function was possible without them; and he and she who were the last to be discovered would carry off the first two. B. M. Gridge was the only one on that gay evening who appeared in his own character; he could not possibly have been anybody else, and besides, it was well enough for somebody to seem to be at home to receive. Juanita, who did not show herself till the Palmers had come, glided into the hall dressed in deep black. Very slim and little she looked and very weird — so little, no one could be in doubt a moment as to who she was; and so black, in slippers, stockings, dress, head-covering and velvet mask, that the diamond necklace seemed a line of fire about her black collar. Long gloves concealed her arms, even the sharp little red elbows — not a morsel of skin was

shown. She was not seeking to represent any character from history or fable — this was frankly an exploitation of the diamond necklace. It was enough. Such a necklace as that had never been seen in Pendleton; it might have gotten a Marie Antoinette into trouble. Surely this was Juanita, but heavens! where could she have found that glittering wonder?

Minna Palmer was a butterfly, or rather a hundred butterflies. Her headdress quivered with artificial butterflies. Her yellow satin robe with its wings of lace typified a most gorgeous specimen; on the toes of her white satin slippers were crimson butterflies, and they were worked on her stockings, one — two — three — oh, there was no knowing how far up they might be flying! But the last word was said by the pin upon her bosom, the diamond butterfly. A few crimps, one might say, were taken out of its wings when it encountered that necklace; still, its diamond eyes still shone bravely. As there was only one such ornament in the county, Minna's name would not be hard guessing; however, it was worth more to her

to wear that pin than win any prize (but how on earth had Juanita come by that necklace? Even diamond butterflies are not always unalloyed delights).

Alfred set himself to discover the identity of all his former schoolmates, taking very little care to preserve his own disguise. It was all amusing, well worth his coming home, to force so much gay laughter out of the past. He was particularly light-hearted with Minna, reminding her of his boyhood affection with the coolness shown by a scientist toward a dried specimen. And when he found Jack Palmer, too fat for incognito, bestowing all his blandishments as a German Baron on the tiny black sprite of the diamond necklace, he did not hesitate to warn him away with—"B. M. Gridge has his eyes on you, Jack the Giant Killer!" (pronouncing Giant in such a manner as to make it a miserable pun for *Juanita*).

But there was a late comer whom Alfred failed to recognize. "Have we ever met?" he asked, seating himself beside her as soon as she had found a chair. Her figure was strik-

ingly handsome, tall and graceful, her bearing was free and easy.

"Yes." The reply was so brief, the voice failed to offer a clew. She was simply dressed, all in white but for the pink mask.

"If your face can at all compare with your hands, your form, and that promise your attitude gives, you are surely the most beautiful of my acquaintances!" he hazarded.

"My beauty does not stop at my face."

"And your voice is like perfect music."

"Shall I play you some more?"

"Do! Tell me what character you represent, for so far as I can make out, you are disguised as an ordinary mortal."

"I am playing Richard, the Second."

"Richard, the Second?"

"Yes; you were very well acquainted with the First."

"Do you mean to tell me that this is Richard?"

"Did you not *have* to be told?"

"But it isn't fair — you are not supposed to be here!"

“ I shall vanish before the unmasking and the dancing.”

“ Oh, please don't, please don't! I — for I must see you, I *must!*” His tones vibrated with earnestness. He was all excitement, all delight. Who could have imagined that Richard would develop into this splendid woman! And she had come to him, as it were — at least, she had made no attempt to escape. He might have guessed forever and all in vain.

“ Why must you see me? ”

“ How can you ask? After our dear friendship — for it was very dear to me — can I help wanting to meet you face to face? O Richard, how could you be so unkind, this whole summer? What hours you made me lose when all the time we might have been enjoying each other's hopes and plans, as in the old days! ”

She shook her head. “ Not as in the old days, sir, for remember, I am Richard, the Second. I have no old days. I took all my old days and made them into a necklace of pearls, then I wound them about young Richard's neck

and buried her. There's no young Richard, nowadays."

Her voice slightly faltered.

"But part of those bygone times belonged to me, and you had no right to cover them up."

"I did it, though. And nobody can bring them back to life. You can't have your share again!"

"You admit part was mine, once?"

"Yes, but you went away and left it."

"Oh, Richard, I never knew what a fool I was, till I wasn't one any longer!"

"No one ever does, I imagine. And how wise you suddenly became, sir!"

"I've never made any such claim. Wise in what?"

"The art of healing, to be sure. Where did you learn it all?"

Alfred burned scarlet behind his mask. Evidently his step-mother had betrayed the sacred secret and Richard had heard of it. Angry with himself for having ever written that unhappy letter, filled with mortification, he was speechless.

The masked figure laughed without bitterness. "And your fame as a healer has spread abroad!" she added, lightly.

It was another way of telling him that the whole neighborhood had learned why he staid away last summer. He cringed. Then with a smothered groan he exclaimed, "Taunt me, Richard! Say to me, 'Physician, heal thyself.' I deserve it, and I couldn't deny the implication."

"Why should I taunt you, I who am Richard, the Second, and have nothing to do with doctors? No, I came to this party on purpose to find you."

"To pardon?"

"To petition."

"You have a favor to ask? What a kind chance! I make only one condition — that you let me see you without your mask."

"If I were to ask a favor as coming from *you*, I suppose I should be obliged to comply. Fortunately the favor is from my uncle; and you are only the medium of communication — a sort of post-office box."

He strove desperately to catch her meaning; why post-office box?

"I am in need, Mr. Montgomery," she added, gravely, "and I must ask you for money."

"Yes," he faltered, faintly. "Oh, yes, certainly." Richard, the Second, did not approach him as a stranger, after all! "I see . . . money." He was too astounded to collect his wits.

She spoke with greater decision, thinking him hesitating: "I must have twenty-five dollars, and must have it at once."

He repeated vaguely, "twenty-five dollars? By all means."

"Perhaps I should explain just why I need this amount."

"Oh, not at all . . . that is immaterial. I understand, then, that you ask me to give you twenty-five dollars?"

"Yes. That will be enough."

"You wouldn't like fifty?" he asked, with a secret flash of humor to illumine his astonishment.

"I'd like only what's necessary."

"Well," Alfred remarked, somewhat drily, "I'm the sort of post-office box that's full of registered letters. You can draw out the twenty-five. But you'll surely give me a date?"

"You can send it to-morrow, to the hotel."

"I mean — you'll let me have an evening with you — an hour, at least?"

"I'm afraid all my hours are engaged."

"But I should have some reward, you know, for — for cashing your wish."

"You'll have the consciousness of knowing you have kept your trust," she returned, rather coolly.

Alfred pondered these words. "Somehow, the reward doesn't seem enough."

"I'm sorry." Richard had no more to say on that point.

Suddenly Alfred began to laugh. He excused himself with, "It's so odd, you know!" Then quickly, "Yes, you'd better tell me why you want the money, it may shed some light on the mystery of all those engaged hours."

"I think it best, too, so you may make a memorandum."

"Then you expect to pay back, some day?"

For an instant Richard was silent, weighing the propriety of letting him take such command of her affairs. "Do you ask that as one who assumes the right to know?"

"Haven't I the right to know what is done with my money?"

"It isn't your money."

"I don't quite understand you, Richard, but certainly I have no rights."

"Then I will tell you. Shall we go out in the moonlight?" He followed her from the house, perplexed but charmed. There was in her walk a grace, and in her figure a beauty of line and motion, that made him eager to accept the popular verdict regarding her face. Surely it, too, was surpassingly lovely, and in the mild influence of the summer night, the tantalizing emotions inspired by her imagined loveliness and the moonlight that surrounded her, brought back the half-forgotten thrill of boyhood's love. Of course he did not love, except so far as one

may worship the features existing in a dream, or may concentrate the perfume of dewy flowers and the mystic charm of silvered meadows and gleaming ponds, weaving the whole into the semblance of a woman's face.

She led him to a bench at a distant corner of the yard, and they became one group in many, scattered over the lawn. Occasionally laughing couples accosted them, but there was less danger of being overheard than in the house, and it soon developed that Richard spoke in confidence.

"If you do me the honor to remember my ambition when you were here last," she said, "you'll remember that I wrote, and expected to become an author. I've never given up this expectation, and never shall, but I have found it impossible to get any of my writings published for pay. The sending back and forth of manuscripts takes a good deal of money, when in every envelope you must inclose return postage. And I have no money. It is terrible to have to ask Cousin Minna for any, because — yes, just because. . . . And I have been

thinking of trying a literary agent. Something must be the matter with my stories, or *somebody* would take *one* of them! Maybe a literary agent could show me what's the matter. But they want money to do such work. Everything requires money — I don't know how the grass grows without it! The worst thing about my work is, that there's nothing to show for expenditures. At the end of two years I have not one check, not one printed word, to show for my investment. I don't blame everybody for thinking I'm wasting my time. But I feel I'm growing stronger in my art, and must be nearer success every day. You see, there's no mystery about how I spend my time; I'm engaged to my art. I slave at my desk, never showing myself a particle of mercy, for oh — for oh, Alfred! if I can just win independence — not fame, that isn't what I want, but to be able to pay my own way — not have to depend on — on other people — on charity . . .”

She stopped abruptly, resolute to spare herself the humiliation, and himself the embarrass-

ment, of a broken voice. He waited for her to continue, but it was a good while before she could do so. All at once the cruelty of her position had seized her by the throat. There was crowded upon her heart the burden of a hundred failures, the ruined fragments of a thousand castles in the air; and just for the moment, those architects of hope which ordinarily built for her so swiftly, so skillfully, out of mere dream-stuff, showed leaden fingers — their fairy touch was lost.

Alfred had a curious impression of being suddenly awakened from a summer's reverie. Though he could not see the face behind the mask, he could, to some degree, penetrate the heart behind those clasped hands. There opened before him a world of labor in which the breezes are grateful because they cool one's brow wet with sweat, and the light is holy because it follows creative work. He was bewildered as he grasped this idea of ceaseless activity, unending endeavor. To his mind, Richard was like one striving to reach the lofty branches of the tree of success, with nothing

upon which to climb but the dead leaves of successive winters.

"I ought to say," added Richard, when sure that her voice would not falter, "that whether I needed the money or not, I should write, because, well — being a writer seems being myself. But I do need the money, I need it to save me from — from an intolerable position. Think of it! See how I'm placed — but you can't understand."

"It isn't right," he cried, impetuously, "for you to give up all pleasure — society and all that — to work day and night. You'll kill yourself, and — and it's unkind to other people. I should think you'd rather go away — teach school, or something, if you feel that you aren't independent with the Palmers." He might have added that a salary would spare her the necessity of applying to him for money.

"But I can't go away — that's what you don't understand. My aunt needs me. I am all she has to depend on."

"You are right to say I can't understand that! She has her own daughter!"

"She needs me," Richard said, quietly, "and will need me more."

"Richard, if you'll permit, I'll undertake to get you a country-school which you can begin teaching the very month I go back to the university."

"I can't leave my aunt."

"Between school hours, you'd have an opportunity to do your writing."

Richard was silent.

Alfred exclaimed, impatiently, "Oh, the obstinacy of the self-sacrificing!"

From the house came the sounds of sudden movements indicating that the time of unmasking was at hand. The warning was shouted across the lawn.

"Time for Cinderella to slip away," said Richard, starting up. "Don't be uneasy about me — I'll dive into that grove, come out upon the street below the meadow, and be in town at once. Good-by."

He stepped with her into the heavy shadow. "But Cinderella must leave her clew — that pink mask, for instance. Oh, Richard, I must

see your face, I have no intention of letting you escape until I have that great happiness. I know too well how difficult it is to find such opportunities."

Richard laughed lightly. "*This* is not an opportunity, it's just something that looks like one, one of those things I've been grasping at all my life! No, you cannot have the mask and I shall certainly not leave my slipper, for I must walk — haven't even a pumpkin-carriage."

Alfred stepped in the path. "Listen, Richard," he said, earnestly, "I shall not remind you of the twenty-five dollars —"

"No need to, it's the last thing I could forget."

"— But on the strength of our past friendship — or because I am determined yet to be your friend — or for whatever reason you please, I declare to you that with your kind permission (I hope) or without it, if it must be, I *will* see your face this night!"

Richard hesitated, and he saw her bosom swell as if agitated by quick emotion.

"I'm sorry to be so rude, so brutal," said Alfred, grimly, "but the fact is, I'm desperate to see you, Richard, and you are so absurdly unkind . . ."

"Very well then, you shall have the mask, you shall look at me if you insist upon it, after I have told you why I object. I'll make the story so short that by the time you go with me through the grove, you'll know it all. When you left Pendleton two years ago, Richard, the First, you will remember, was in love with you. She was a very lonely child, and after her father's death, you came into her life in such a way that there was no one but you to fill it. She could never have told you of her love if she hadn't known that you loved her cousin, and you were so down-hearted, she thought it would give you courage to take up your life after you'd been refused; besides, you were going away—and then, well, she loved you so that when you were sitting there miserable, broken-hearted, she couldn't help wanting you to know. Such a queer child! She's dead, now."

Alfred, with bowed head, listened intently, as he kept beside her through shadows.

“When you were gone, it was her life to write, and think of you. She loved to stretch herself on the grass down by the Spring — where you had rested — and recall your features, your voice, your words, and imagine you standing there, the Alfred she prayed for every day, whom she had called her ‘Knight.’ And when winter came, she used to wonder if you would ever write to her, just a note, a line, to say that you were happier, that you were learning to bear the great sorrow of always loving Minna, but never being loved — for the ridiculous little girl imagined you could never cease loving Minna, for you had told her so! And she thought what a white star day it would be if a message came from you signed, ‘Your Knight.’ Foolish Richard, the First, to think she was ever in your mind!”

“But she was often in my mind!” cried Alfred.

“As she wandered over frozen ground, she’d make dreams about you as pure and beautiful

as the snow: you would always live alone, and so would she and perhaps, some day, in the same city; and you would come to talk about your work, and she would tell you about her books, never more than that because your heart would never love again; while she could never love another. Such little-girl's fancies, clear and white like the snow scattered on the frozen ponds! So she carried you to every nook of Uncle Zack's farm — how she loved that dear place, now in strangers' hands. *They'll* never see you waving in the long grass or rising from the snow."

Alfred bent his head lower.

"There wasn't any change in the little thing until last summer when everybody said you couldn't come home because I — let us say *she* — was in love with you and had told you so! And everybody was so sorry for the little thing, and so curious to see how she looked in love! Minna and Jack had to get acquainted all over with her, and people said it was such a pity, such a pity — but so strange! It was strange. So the little thing shut herself up in her room

and wrote till her hand cramped, and her brain was hardly clearer than her ink, trying not to think about it, trying only to write something worth while — to write, to write, to write — to write you out of her heart, to cross you all over, to cover you with other thoughts. But you were pretty deep in the child's brain — or heart."

They came to a thorn bush that stretched across the footpath and Alfred reached out to draw aside the branches.

"No, let me," cried Richard, quickly. "I don't want other people to clear the difficulties from my path. Then I heard from your step-mother that you were coming home, which meant you had given Richard, the First, time to get over her infatuation. So she looked into her soul to discover if it were quite healed, for she had been so frantically absorbed in her work, she had not taken time to inquire. And what do you think she found? That whether for good or ill, you were so intertwined among the fibres of her being, that she couldn't tell where you began and where you ended! You

couldn't be plucked out, for you were part of her life. So I said I would kill Richard, the First, with all her memories, with all her love. And I buried her."

"You couldn't!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "Richard, if I was there — in your heart — so securely — you couldn't have driven me out by any act of will."

"I could, and I have done so!" she declared. "For I am not the child that loved you, I am the woman who has nothing to do with love. I will not have those old days dug from their grave. My life is a very serious one, and my work is very jealous. I tell you, nothing shall interfere with it! Society shall not distract me, temptations of idleness shall be unheeded, and as I cannot make friends, I owe no time to friendship. I am Richard, the Second, and, Alfred — forgive me — I have no time for you. My need is too desperate for you to accuse me of selfishness. I must succeed; I must make my way; I must gain independence — and I haven't the leisure to let the ink rust on my pen. Maybe I'd write better if I

rested, but how can I rest until I have written something to make me free? ”

“ If you would leave the Palmers — board in the country or city and teach school — ”

“ I can't leave my aunt. She depends on me — couldn't do without me. If I were gone, she'd be left alone half the time, and it terrifies her to sleep in an empty house at the mercy of uncertain servants. Minna and Cousin Jack go to the city once or twice a week with a theater party, or take overland auto-rides, and when they stay at home, they are out till midnight at parties, or have their own house filled with guests. If my aunt didn't have me, what could she do but die of loneliness and fear? When Uncle Zack comes home, as I'm sure he will, some day, I shall be proud to show that I've been worthy of his confidence and love. Minna and Jack give me shelter and food just because my uncle left me on their hands. You see why I am desperate for money? That's why I dare not stop writing, even to breathe! ”

“ I have had several long talks with Mrs. Flood this summer,” Alfred remarked, hesi-

tatingly, "and she has never once intimated that she depends upon you for anything."

"Oh, my aunt doesn't know that she needs me. I'm just like the air — she lives on it without a thought. When I sit writing beside her while the house is ringing with gaiety, or is silent from desertion, very likely she imagines I am rather in her way! But if I weren't there, you'd see! Sometimes — it's the strangest thing! — she actually resents finding so much comfort in my company because it seems to cast a reflection upon her daughter — whom she worships. She wouldn't for the world praise me for being faithful, it would seem to hint that Minna neglects her. The fact is, she quite deceives herself — she has to — her faith in Minna is like the breath of her nostrils. Shall we say good night? — here is the road."

"*Must* we say it?"

"*Yes* — they'll miss you from the ball. And I don't want you to see my face, because I want to be strangers with you — do you mind?"

"Oh, yes, Richard, I mind cruelly. You'll never know how my heart has been wrung by what you have told me —"

"That's well. I don't want to know anything but my work. You've heard of artists making a choice between art and life, but I'm spared the need of choosing for I've not the alternative. It's just plain work for me — anything that interferes with that, is my enemy. Alfred," she added very earnestly, but gently, too, "you would interfere with my work — you would destroy it!"

"Good night," said Alfred, opening the gate and letting her pass into the moon-lighted road, without offering his hand. "It shall be as you said: I will be strangers with you."

"Thank you." She moved quickly away.

Alfred called tremulously, "But not for always, Richard, not for always?"

There was no hesitation in the white figure as it slipped along the shadow-fringe where the grove overlooked the smooth, gleaming country-road.

Alfred stood in the open gateway and called

again, "Say not for always, Richard, not strangers for always!"

Her voice came to him faintly, but full of sweetness: "Who knows? Perhaps not for always."

CHAPTER XIII

OLD TIMES AND NEW

THE solitary cottonwood-tree which had attracted Richard's attention the evening Alfred drove her from the Pendleton station to her new home, was little changed since then, and yet through the summers of nine successive years, its leaves had whispered of fragrant breezes, or roared in the sudden storm. Early summer had come for the tenth year and its shadow danced on the long meadow-grass as gleefully, as much at home, as if the song of those agitated branches had never been interrupted by the touch of winter. The same fence of wire and hedge-posts divided the unbroken field of bluegrass from the fringe of goldenrod, mullein and Spanish needles which had not yet achieved their yellow glory along the broad country road. It seemed to the wanderer, as he halted in the shade of

the lofty tree, that the very ruts of the road were those in which his wheels had sped, so long ago. Everything was the same — fields of corn and timothy and red clover; fences, road, cottonwood-tree; blue sky and golden sun; fragrance of earth and shrill sweetness of meadowlarks — nothing had changed in all that landscape, but himself.

Zack Flood had no delusions about himself, or, so far as he could help it, about anybody else. He knew his feet were ten years heavier, his hair ten years grayer, his heart ten years older, than on the day he last passed under the shadow of this old landmark. To another it might have occurred that nature was cruel to keep eternally young as if reminding him that long after he had passed for the final journey beyond the cottonwood-tree, its shade would be as sweet for somebody else, while in its rippling melody would be no memory of him. But even if Zack had been susceptible to such generalizations he would have grimly declared that one life was enough for him, and the tree could

shelter whom it might when he had no further use for it.

After a brief rest, he resumed his way toward the farm, his sturdy pace never quickening, but his eye growing brighter and brighter as the distance from the station increased. On leaving the train, nobody had recognized him, though he could have called a dozen of the platform-loungers by their first names. If possible, he would conceal his identity on reaching his old home, that is, just for an hour or so, addressing his wife, his daughter, his niece, and that lazy son-in-law of his, as a complete stranger. Of course they would be there, sitting on the porch, very likely — at least Jack would be sitting — and he would walk forward, diffidently, asking either for work or for something to eat. While trying to choose his part between that of a farmhand and a mendicant, he laughed with impatience and a mist rose to his eyes — but he would not hurry. There was time enough — or, if not, running would avail nothing. One does not run forward to

seize the days that have flown over one's shoulder.

As luck would have it, he had met B. M. Gridge face to face in the station; his old friend had stared at him intently, but as one who gazes upon a stranger. Ten years had greatly changed "B. M."—Zack doubted if he could stand on his hands nowadays! but evidently Zack was changed much more. It would be such a joke if his wife failed to recognize him! . . . Zack found himself running, and brought up short, with a severe, "You old fool!"

His destination came in sight — the dear old farm, looking so new! The spring still trickled into the brook, the brook slipped away between the same green banks, with the same murmur of tiny waterfalls. There, in the back lot, stood three mules at the wormeaten feed-trough, and through the open loftdoor could be seen hay stacked to the cupola — it was just like Jack to leave open that door . . . but it was not like him to have so much hay in his barn. And the house, so well-kept, so neatly painted — had he misjudged Jack, after all?

If so, he had been sufficiently punished by his long exile.

As he opened the yard gate he remembered the day of the annual picnic when he had sprung over the stiles half-stifled with rage and terror. Passing the honeysuckle arbor he recalled the days of its planning and making. It seemed to him that he could see baby Minna's bare feet running before him along the walk, and that from the window where the sugar maple tapped against the weather-boarding, looked out the older Minna, as beautiful as only one's own child can be. At the front porch he paused, staring at the wooden seats fastened in each side, and remembering how he and his wife had sat there at the close of day, looking out over the green world with its wind-ruffled ponds dark and gleaming by turns, in the young days when there was no Minna.

He was so overwhelmed by these recollections which defied any logical or chronological order, that he stood a long time, seeking to compose himself, grateful that he had not been discovered. The distant hum of voices told

him that the family was on the side-porch. It was about five o'clock — the time when he and his wife had been wont to enjoy a restful pause before taking up those duties that cluster about the supper-hour. He was none the less impatient to greet his loved ones because he had voluntarily staid away, and had denied himself all possible means of hearing from them during ten years. The deepest love and the most unyielding obstinacy are often found in the same heart; and while to his last breath, Zack would maintain that his staying away had been for the best, and under the same circumstances he would do it again, it was equally as true that his starved soul had been kept alive only on the expectations of a happy reunion. He was even ready to put his arms about Jack and say, "Be as worthless as you please, I'll support you the rest of my life! No, I'm not sorry I went away — but I'm not going again."

When he hoped he could trust himself, Zack went around the house, giving love-glances to the uneven stones before the side porch, the damson-tree that had grown amazingly since

Minna used to climb it, and, over yonder, the toolhouse where he had made so many things to outlast himself, and where Richard had scribbled herself into the belief that she had a career.

On the long side-porch sat a man and woman of middle age whom Zack had never seen. The porch itself was painfully familiar. The water-bucket hung from the very nail he had driven in the wall. The woodbox by the kitchen-door had been papered, but he could see it was the same he had made from lumber left after one of the many additions built for Minna's benefit. Suppose, on learning of her secret marriage, he had made no complaint, had not gone away — had simply built another room! Upon the wall three feet above the bench, hung a sunbonnet, blue, shapeless. That was Minna's nail; she used to climb upon the bench and reach up, oh, so proudly — then look round at her father and mother with eyes saying, "You see I can do it!" And what a marvel it was to them that she could do it — that she could do anything! Was ever such

another wonder in the world as that little Minna?

"Good evening," said the sturdily-built, smooth-faced man who sat in a great round-backed chair, speaking and sitting as one having authority.

"Could I see Mr. Palmer — Mr. Jack Palmer?" asked Zack, doubtfully. Already he suspected the truth. No stranger would be sitting in that round-backed chair with such an air of having filled it many a time; either this was a renter, or —

"I guess you're mistaken," said the man, removing his pipe. "Mr. Palmer used to own this place, but I bought it of him eight years ago. You'll find him in town, I guess. Been a good while since you were in these parts? Have a chair. Don't happen to be looking for a job, do you? Porter's my name."

Zack sat down heavily; at last he was once more under his own roof. "Oh, he sold out, did he? I'm surprised — and yet, now I think of it, that's exactly what I expected. Yes, I've been down in Arkansas a long time. I — I

used to work on this farm, not for Palmer, however; I always worked for Zack Flood."

The woman spoke, persuasively. "The Hand's House is empty and until we can find a family to live on the place, there it is. . . . If you could cook for yourself — Mr. Porter has been left to do the milking and he wouldn't be very particular; our man that did the jobs about the house went away without a word, day-before-yesterday. Would you be strong enough? — I'm afraid you're pretty old."

"Strong? Why, yes, I can bear a good deal," said Zack, in the slow voice he had acquired in the solitude of his Arkansas farm. He had grown into the habit of talking to himself, where there were few to talk to, and his tones had a special significance to himself which was lost on other ears. "Yes, I can bear a good deal. The Hand's House is the place for me, the very place! As for cooking, that's what I've done the past ten years, all my own cooking. Yes, I'll milk your cows and do anything else you want. I'm about sixty years

old, but I'm good for a long life yet, unless somebody takes and kills me."

"So you used to work on this place when it belonged to what-do-you-call-'im, Jack Palmer's father-in-law, eh?" said Porter, interestedly. "You ought to know what kind of a chap he was."

"I expect I know Zack Flood better than most folks."

"Did you ever see any signs of craziness on him?"

Mrs. Porter added, "He was crazy when he went away. What kind of looking man was he?"

"As different from me as could be," replied Zack, meditatively. "Where my face is running wild with whiskers, his was clean-shaven except for a mustache that he kept sort of lawn-mowed just so it could speak for itself, but never interrupt anybody. He was my height, about, but Lord! he was always as straight as a young sapling, his shoulders fairly r'ared back — and you see I'm all bunched over like a beanpod curling up in dry weather. He

stepped as light and brisk as a girl, and he did no little stepping as I can testify, for if he hadn't a-kept ahead of his daughter's expense-account he would sure have been run over."

She interrupted: "But I meant, did he look sort of wild and curious at times? Seems that he was losing his mind without any one suspicioning it. He just went off and left this farm, nobody knew why — deeded it to his wife and daughter, between them, and 's never been heard of since."

"I think his eye *was* sort of fixed at times, ma'am. I suppose his wife and child are living in town?"

"His daughter — Mrs. Jack Palmer — lives in Pendleton. But his wife —" Mrs. Porter shook her head.

"Don't tell me," Zack cried out so wildly that they looked at him curiously. "Don't — don't tell me that she is *dead*. I — I — you know, I never thought of that."

"Dead? No." Mrs. Porter spoke in an angry voice. "Oh, no, *she's* not dead. But they've put her in an almshouse."

"They wouldn't dare!" cried the wanderer, starting up, fiercely. "Wasn't she given half of this farm? I guess you've got that wrong, ma'am. I don't think Jack Palmer's that cruel, and I know Minna would have died first."

"Sit down and take it cool," said the farmer, with dry kindliness. "My wife always puts that wrong end foremost. She *will* have it an almshouse. Take my word, it's nothing of the sort."

"Excuse me," said Zack, slowly seating himself. "I guess I caught some of Flood's insanity, working for him so long. Well, if it isn't an almshouse, what is it?"

Porter stared at the ceiling, then at his pipe. "It's a refuge," he explained, at last.

"What was she escaping from? Her daughter?"

Mrs. Porter remarked, "You must have thought a great deal of her husband!"

"I've got a mighty low opinion of him, now. Where is that — refuge?"

"Five miles out of town. A few years ago,

her church built a Home for this state — a Home for Old People. She's out there."

"Didn't she have a home of her own?"

"She gave that to Jack Palmer."

"But she's not old enough to be taken into such a place."

"I guess she's older than you think. They all call her 'Old Mrs. Flood.' She's never been young since we moved to this county. She was so *o-o-old*, and weakly, and in-the-way, that they didn't know what to do *with* her. And when they went to Europe of course they couldn't take *her* along, and there was nobody to keep her; but I always said it was wrong to send her to an almshouse."

Porter corrected, "'Tain't an almshouse, it's a refuge. It's a Home."

"My God!" muttered Zack. "Is there anything on earth more desolate than a Home that begins with a capital 'H'? Her husband deserves —"

"Oh, he was crazy, I reckon he couldn't help it," interposed Mrs. Porter. "He just went off. Wasn't any reason or anything — he just

went. He got up and put out. Sometimes I think if he ever gets his senses and comes back and finds his wife in an almshouse, he'll do something."

"Yes," said Zack, slowly. "He will. I know him and I can vouch for him that he'll do something. That is, *if* he ever gets his senses. Wasn't any reason for him to leave his family, you say?"

"Not a thing. None of his folks ever knew why he pulled loose. They say he hadn't ever mistreated his family, that is with quarreling and the like, though he was pretty close with his daughter. She'd set her heart on an automobile for years, but he wouldn't hear to it. She got one after he left. She's had two since then."

"I reckon her mother doesn't handle one, does she?"

Porter started from his chair, on discovering a horseman riding up to the gate. "Come in, come in, Mr. Gridge!" he called.

B. M. Gridge dismounted, tied his horse to the gate, and came over the stiles with a step

as slow and heavy as that of the wanderer. Zack shrank a little from his gaze, for already half-formed plans which depended upon his escaping recognition, were forming in his agitated mind.

The merchant greeted the Porters with none of his old-time heartiness, then glanced carelessly at Zack Flood, remarking, "I saw you get off the train."

Zack nodded, afraid his voice would betray him, for he was unconscious of its altered tone.

"Our new hand," said Mrs. Porter, with an air of grateful proprietorship—"Mr. Sprized." Zack wondered where she had found that name, then decided that when he had said "I'm surprised," she had fancied he was introducing himself.

"Yes," he ventured, "I'm Sprized." The voice awoke no suspicions.

"I was at the station," remarked Gridge, heavily, "when the train came in, and as I happened to have my horse there, I thought I'd ride out here. I can't explain it, but I got to

thinking about Zack Flood — man that used to own this farm — and he got so bodily natural I could just *see* him, and that put me to thinking of the old place . . . and I remembered I'd never taken time to call on you people . . .”

“We've been talking about nothing but old Mr. Flood for the past hour,” cried Mrs. Porter. “This man used to work for him, and knew him like a book.”

Gridge looked at Flood again, but without much interest; farmhands flitted to and fro in that neighborhood like birds alternating between north and south. Flood carried his chair out under the damson-tree that the others might feel relieved from his presence, and while they indulged in general conversation, he watched his old friend, pained to find how much he had aged in every way, and apparently with no recompensing gift of cheerful patience.

At last he heard Gridge say, “Well, you don't know how odd it is for Zack Flood to seem so near! It's the farm — he was almost a part of it — I can just see him driving in that gate and throwing the lines to his man — this

very man, likely enough." Then to Zack — "I understand you're from Arkansas."

"Yes, I worked for a man down there a long time, and strange enough, he was named Flood, too."

"He was? Couldn't have been my friend, could he?" Gridge looked startled.

"Who? The Mr. Flood I worked for up here? If he'd been the same, I'd have known it."

"Of course." Gridge seemed relieved. "Yes, of course you'd have known it. When he went away, he said he'd come back in ten years if he was alive. Well — it's ten years this summer. But he'll never come back. If he hadn't been dead long ago, of course he'd have written, or people would have come across him. You can't hide away ten years in this world. There's too many newspapers."

"I guess that's so," said Zack, "generally speaking."

"Yes. Oh, Zack Flood'll never come back. Never!"

"From what I've been hearing," remarked

Zack, "there isn't anybody wanting him much."

Mrs. Porter exclaimed, "I'll bet his wife would 'most die of joy to see him coming up the walk of that elegant new almshouse. But I reckon his daughter would die of shame, I know I would in her place."

"It would be awful responsible for him," Zack observed, "to cause two funerals."

"But he's dead," interposed Gridge, positively. "He *must* be dead, you know!"

"Yes," Porter agreed, "one funeral will have to satisfy him — it would me."

After a pause, Gridge said, "But you don't put that right, Mrs. Porter. She's in no almshouse. That's a Home for Old People, and it's kept up by her church. It's — it's a religious institution. Mrs. Flood likes it there. I've discussed it with her several times. She prefers staying there where she can be independent and be waited on without disturbing her friends. Minna wouldn't have let her go there if she hadn't insisted."

Mrs. Porter sniffed skeptically while her hus-

band remarked that he was always arguing it wasn't an almshouse. "Seems like you have to keep saying so, for fear you'll forget," he explained, as he refilled his pipe.

Suddenly Zack lost control over himself. "God will hold somebody to account for this!" he cried, looking at Gridge as if to penetrate his very soul. It had been only eight years since the farm was sold; surely Mrs. Flood had not been found in the way at first. And the diamonds were worth five thousand dollars — not very much, but enough to keep her out of the Home for Old People. "Had she *no* friends to prevent this?" Then, abruptly, "Weren't *you* a friend of her husband?"

"She wanted to go there," Gridge answered; instead of resenting the other's manner, he seemed anxious to defend himself. "She likes it. You see, there isn't any other place where she can feel at home, like. When she had a home of her own, she was so proud of it, so close-bound to it, that after her husband deserted her —"

"The d—— scoundrel!" ejaculated Porter, knocking out his pipe with sudden energy.

Zack started up with a flush. "Mr. Porter," he cried, "you'll please remember that — that —" He checked himself with a grimace — "that he was Mr. Gridge's friend — and it's not nice to say hard things about the dead."

"If he's dead, I'm sorry I said it," remarked the farmer. "But if he's alive, I don't think Mr. Gridge's friendship will stand in the way of expressing the truth. Most friendship in this world is just 'How do you do?' and passing on."

"I was a real friend to Zack Flood!" declared Gridge, striking his chair with clenched hand. "If I could have done anything for his wife, I'd have done it. I'd have been willing to share with her what I had, but she'd have been too proud to take it. When her husband went away he left in my care a diamond pin to be given her in case she sold this farm."

"Just a diamond pin?" inquired Zack Flood, without looking up.

"Well," returned Gridge, "it was very val-

uable — worth fifteen hundred dollars. When she sold the farm, I handed it over; but she gave it to her daughter off-hand. If Flood had left me anything else for her it would have been the same. Just the same! Jack Palmer would have gotten it — I might as well have thrown it in the big road.”

“Is that the diamond butterfly I’ve seen her wear at church?” asked Mrs. Porter, with sudden interest.

“Yes — the diamond butterfly.”

“Zack Flood didn’t leave you anything else for her, then?” inquired Zack.

“No — just the diamond butterfly.”

Zack rose. “Mr. Porter, if you please, I’ll thank you to show me the way to the Hand’s House.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE DIAMOND NECKLACE

RIDING homeward, B. M. Gridge selected the longest way, occasionally following lanes that carried him back over the same roads. He was in a state of intense excitement produced by a sudden revolution of all his purposes. Consciously, he did not associate the stranger with his changed attitude toward the future; it seemed but a sudden impulse, springing from renewed intimacy with the Flood farm. As he had explained, Zack Flood was almost materially before him, so clearly and inexplicably had his mental vision reproduced that long-absent friend; but though so clearly present, he did not cease to assure himself that Zack was dead — must be dead.

It must be so, because, otherwise, he would surely return, and the time of his coming was at hand. It must be so because, if he returned.

. . . It was with no friendly smile that Zack Flood looked at him from out the past. And then his conscience which for eight years had never ceased to torment him, cried out that whether Flood were alive or dead, his trust was the same. He had dishonored the holy name of friendship, but it was not too late to make some amends; or, if too late to undo the wrong of the past, there was still time to check the impulse to add to that wrong a fresh crime.

Gridge wondered dully why he should hesitate now. Until this afternoon, his intention had not wavered of adding to his sins against Zack Flood, in spite of remorse over former wrongs. He had been sure he would dispose of the third diamond for his personal ends, as he had of the diamond necklace. Either that, or ruin. To be sure the third diamond could not save him, could only put off the inevitable day of failure a few months, but in those few months, what might not happen to save his commercial honor?

Yet as he rode homeward, and even after he reached Pendleton and came in sight of his big

house on the "only fashionable street," his sudden resolve to carry that third diamond to Mrs. Flood was unaltered.

"What is the matter?" Juanita asked, alarmed, when he came upon her in her dressing-room.

He stopped just within the closed door, looking grimly about upon the thousand little appliances that kept his wife young and pretty. He thought her distractingly pretty in half-undress, pausing in leisurely hair-brushing to look up at him with that birdlike tilt of her head. She thought him as heavy and awkward and preposterously old as usual; but his face was fixed in soul-agony that gave it a cast of cruel mirth, as if it were laughing at her empty life. She was dressing for that eternal Ladies' Card Party. A smothered groan was upon his lips — a wild desire to cry out against her futility — but she was so tender, so little, so innocent, so pretty. She had cost him the best of himself, and now the house threatened to fall upon them in chaotic ruin — but she was so pretty.

"I believe you're ill!" said Juanita, some-

what sharply, as if in rebuke. "Why don't you consult a doctor? You've been looking that way six months, I know."

"It's the way a man looks, I guess, when he's ruined. Juanita, you'd have to know the truth to-morrow, you might as well hear it now. We're ruined. Yes, I mean it — we haven't anything. The store-doors won't open to-morrow. And after the inventory, there'll be a sacrifice sale — that'll mean something for my creditors, not much. This house must go —"

Juanita uttered a piercing scream and threw her brush upon the floor. "You are mad!" she cried shrilly. "You are mad! You are mad!"

"I wish I were, Juanita. If I keep my senses, how can I live? For we have nothing."

"Do you mean that when the stock is sold —"

"Yes, and this house, too; that won't wipe out the debt."

"Then why, in the name of heaven, did you plunge into debt?"

Gridge stared at her, blindly.

"I say, why didn't you live within your income?" cried Juanita, leaping to her feet. "Didn't you have anything when you married me? You made me think so. Were you in debt then? How have you *got* into debt?"

"We haven't lived very economically, dear," he faltered, wearily.

"*I* haven't been extravagant. *I* haven't spent any more than one in my position is obliged to spend. Good heavens! one owes something to one's station, one owes *a little* to society. I've been as economical as Minna Flood, and her husband doesn't do *anything* for a living! You work from morning to night, you are always grinding away. How does Jack Palmer support *his* wife?"

"I fancy he has very little."

"You fancy! And this is what it meant when I chose you . . . it was to be ruined. That was what you wanted with me—to shame me before the world. Oh, I can't bear it, and I won't bear it! You can stand there with that patient, doglike humility and say without a quiver, 'I'm ruined—I'm ruined.' But

I shall not say it. I shall not be patient. I shall not show humility. If you think Minna Flood will ever point at me and say, 'She's ruined,' you don't know me." She burst into passionate sobbing.

Gridge was helpless. He silently bowed his head, as if acknowledging the justice of his punishment.

"And what did I do when I wanted to go to Europe?" cried Juanita. "Jack could take Minna without any trouble, but you couldn't let *me* go with them, because you were 'hard up'—you've always been hard up, hard up! And I told you I'd sell the diamond necklace, I'd sacrifice it, yes, I'd strip myself of the only ornament worthy of me, to raise the money. And I did it. Minna could keep her diamond butterfly but I had to give my necklace to the brokers to raise passage-money. You promised to redeem it."

"As there is a God, Juanita, I expected to buy back that necklace, I would rather hold it in my hand now, than live another day."

Juanita's frenzied outburst was checked.

Her voice dropped. "I'm so excited," she faltered. "Of course I'm sorry for you, too. It's hard for you, I know, but it's broken my heart. I've said too much. Don't mind that. But, oh, why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't know it would come just now. I thought I had a way to put off the crash —" He was thinking of the third diamond, already taken from the bank and now lying upstairs in his cabinet drawer.

"Then put it off! put it off!"

"I thought there was a way, but — but —"

"There must be some escape, or you wouldn't have thought so."

"Listen, Juanita, it's like this: if some one had given me money to keep in trust, and if I drew it to tide us over this emergency —"

"But why not? You owe it to me."

"It might be like that necklace I was never able to redeem; there's no assurance that I could ever recover this trust-money."

"But you have the assurance that without it you are lost — I am lost!"

"Yes."

Juanita ran to him and seized his arm.

"Is it enough to ward off the blow?"

"For a few months."

"And there's this house, you could get another loan on it."

"No, dear, it's mortgaged to the last penny it can carry."

"Never mind, something will happen, something must happen."

"That's what I thought when you sold the necklace to go with Minna to France. But I'm thinking nothing ever happens but trouble."

"Anyway, it needn't be *now*, this disgrace. Don't you love me? You used to love me! Look at me, look at me, save me while you can! And I was getting ready for the biggest party of the season — everything is spoiled — I shall never hold up my head again. But you won't let your poor little Juanita drop out of life — I tell you if it happens, it'll kill me. Tell me that you do love me after all, and that you'll save my life."

Gridge sank in a chair, drew her upon his knee and crushed her against his bosom. "I

love you — my God, how intensely I have always loved you! You beautiful, exquisitely beautiful darling! — darling, kiss me — kiss me once, just once of your own dear sweet will.”

“Then you are going to borrow that trust-money?”

“The owner isn’t here to give his consent. Kiss me, beautiful one, just once.”

“But you’ll take it, won’t you, since it’s in your trust — I mean take it just long enough to tide you over these horrible troubles?”

“No,” cried Gridge loudly, as if denying himself, “not for an hour!”

“You’ll see us ruined first?”

“Yes, by ——” he uttered a strangled oath — “I’ll see us both ruined first!”

She struck him in the face and leaped from his embrace. “Then go — go —” all her former passion rushed upon her, turning her face to crimson — “go, I never want to see you again — you shall never touch me — or speak to me — or look at me — or ——” She flung herself upon a couch and quivered from head to foot with violent sobs.

Gridge stood looking down upon that miserable figure for only a moment, then left the room and ascended the stairs with the tread of an infirm old man. As he sought his pistol in the cabinet, as he slipped the diamond bracelet into his bosom, the dull wonder returned — Why was he about to carry this bracelet to Mrs. Flood when, until this afternoon, he had been resolute in his purpose to convert it into money? What unforeseen strength had armed him against the charms of his wife which hitherto had always proved irresistible?

He did not know, but he was conscious of that swift, soul-flooding exaltation known to the criminal who after years of silence, voluntarily gives himself up to be punished for a crime of which none but he knows himself guilty. From baseness blossoms unexpected heroism, flowers springing from the mire; and B. M. Gridge, rather weak than base, rode away toward the Old People's Home, his face still marked in the cruel lines of soul-agony, but with head erect, eyes unfalteringly bright.

CHAPTER XV

TWO CALLERS

WHILE B. M. Gridge was on his way to the Old People's Home, Mrs. Flood had already received a visitor in the single room which now marked the horizon of her life.

"Thought I'd drive out and see you — thought you might be getting lonesome," said Jack Palmer, on entering. His great physical dimensions seemed augmented in the chamber, as if he filled the space of half a dozen men; but although there was so much of him — decidedly more than in his younger days — his mother-in-law did not begrudge him one square inch of room. He went, as by instinct, to the only window, drew off his coat, and, sitting down, blotted out the June landscape whose early twilight bathed grazing cattle and horses drinking at the ponds, and woods waiting for

their nests to be closed for the night. Mrs. Flood could see nothing but the handsome head of her visitor, and the light peeping around his neck — it was as if he had flung his coat over a toy Noah's ark. However, she asked to see nothing but Jack. It was somewhat like seeing her daughter.

"Lonesome?" repeated Mrs. Flood, "oh, no, I never get lonesome."

"That's what Minna always says." Jack looked at her kindly. It did not strike him that a great change had taken place in face and form since his marriage, because that change had been wrought under his very eye. He only thought that she was getting pretty old, while the whiteness of her skin, the thinness of her body, the little tremulousness noticeable at times when she sought to sit erect, touched him with compassion. Of course, when one grows old, one cannot expect to be strong or well, one cannot, for that matter, expect to live so very long. But it seemed a pity.

"Is there anything I could do for you, Mother? Is there anything you want?"

"Oh, I have all that heart could wish," said the other, smiling bravely, "unless I might have seen Minna a little oftener — but the five-mile ride is too much for her, I know. If the Home had only been built in Pendleton! But you can't have everything you wish — and there's a splendid view from my window."

Jack turned his head and looked out. He seemed to stare right through the cows, horses and woods, and see — nothing. "It would kill me," he remarked frankly. "Don't anybody *ever* pass? Doesn't *anything* ever happen?"

Mrs. Flood grew slightly reserved in her manner, to reprove such ingratitude. "There's a great deal of cattle-driving past the Home," she said, sedately.

"And I reckon," remarked Jack, reflectively, "that it's better for you than all the noise and confusion at our place. Minna says you enjoy the quiet. She says you haven't had a headache since you got out of town."

"It's true, the country air is so delightful

— yes, and, as you say, the quiet. It is very quiet. No more headaches!" Then she smiled, uncertainly. "Sometimes just a little — a little heartache — to see Minna. But I know she isn't strong, the ride is long and rough. . . . I'm so glad you came. Oh, please don't go, yet — stay with me, Jack — it's so, it's so — I never am lonesome, you must understand, but it's so — different from the old times . . . I just want to keep you with me."

Jack, who had risen, sank back in his chair, and Mrs. Flood crossing the room, patted his shoulder.

"I just came for a minute," he said, giving up his purpose of immediate flight.

"How big you are getting!" She still patted his arm, wildly casting about in her mind for some means of fastening him to his chair — for big as he was, experience told her that he had rare agility in transporting himself beyond her portal. "Listen, Jack! What would you say to a dish of strawberries? the first dish of the season."

"That sounds mighty interesting to me,"

said Jack, crossing one leg over the other knee with the aid of both hands. "But I don't suppose such a thing as real cream ever showed itself in this place, did it, Mother?"

Mrs. Flood was in raptures. "Yes, yes!" she cried, triumphantly.

"And you mean to tell me that the old ladies live on strawberries, while we miserable young people are dying of hunger?"

She put her finger to her lips and spoke in an undertone. "Just *one* old lady, Jack, just one. We must be very quiet about it — don't speak too loud or the next room will hear. There's just enough for one, and we mustn't make the others feel bad. Yes, Jack, big, juicy strawberries, each as large as that —" she measured with her thin hand. "And thick yellow cream, and no stint of sugar; and a slice of cake as light as air."

"O Lord!" cried Jack, remorsefully, "but I mustn't eat it up from you, Mother, I couldn't do that."

"S-h-h! Don't let her hear, Jack, but really, strawberries do *not* agree with me, very

well. Not *always* — and I mustn't have those headaches coming back —"

"Mother, you're a fraud!"

"Just you wait — just you wait!" She hurried excitedly to her small table, drew back the cloth, touched a callbell, then went to the door and waited. Presently a step was heard on the other side. She half opened the door.

"Thank you, thank you," she said, breathlessly, to the invisible waiter. "No, you needn't arrange the table, I will see to that. . . . Excuse me if I say you needn't come in — I have some business to attend to — yes, I can carry the things quite well — good-by, dear." The door closed and she bore cake, berries, cream, and sugar to the little table. "Now sit right down here, Jack, for I have something in this dish fit for a king."

"Aha!" Jack quickly exchanged the window for the table. "That's an invaluable servant, Mother. How can the Home afford to employ such a fairy?"

"Don't you remember, Jack? It's Richard."

“Oh, yes. So she’s still here, is she? Well, that was certainly the funniest freak that the freakiest girl I ever knew, was guilty of. There’s Dicky with a good education, knowing all sorts of things and thinking she knows everything — why, she could have been teaching school, or working in an office, instead of being a servant — doesn’t seem right to me. Minna thinks it’s pretty hard on the family. It did seem more respectable when she hid in her room and refused to see anybody. That gives you a sort of high and noble name. But to act as a maid in a Home —” He selected the largest berry and let it close his sentence.

“She’s a great comfort to me,” Mrs. Flood said, timidly. “Yonder in the corner is her desk, and as soon as it’s dark she comes and does her writing while I sit near, knitting or sewing or just with folded hands when my eyes are resting. It’s like having somebody near that belongs to me. She’s a little piece of the old life, left over. All day long she never rests, waiting on the old ladies, going errands for them — and her wages are very little more

than her board; but at dark the agreement is that she's not to be called — she belongs to me. She knows every ailment of every old lady, and she asks about each one without ever making a mistake; and she reads to us and tells us about the outside world, and knows how to make our pains lighter and how to send our minds off visiting in gay places when they get to brooding — some of the old ladies are like homesick school-girls. I don't know what we'd do without Richard."

"Of course it's nice for you, Mother — but —"

"I don't see how she could do as much good at any other work."

"I expect not. But the *name* of it isn't as high as teaching, you know. She's just a *servant* — people call her a *servant*, and let her go at that. But there's no use to argue with her, nobody can turn Dicky's head. By the way, Alfred Montgomery has come back on a visit. I wish he'd marry Richard and carry her away to the sort of life she's fit for. Alfred's made good. He has as much practice

as any young lawyer in the city. Lord, how industrious that chap always was!" Jack sighed and poured out more cream.

"Alfred marry Richard!" echoed Mrs. Flood, pale and trembling. "What do you mean? Alfred was in love with Minna . . ."

"Yes, he was till she married me. But Richard was dead in love with him, and even told him so — don't you remember how everybody nearly died about it? Well, *Dicky* never changes; if she loved him then, she loves him now. And he knows it. That's the sort of thing to work on a fellow's feelings. I wish they could be brought together. I'd like to have her dragged out of this sort of thing — Minna feels it — I wouldn't mind that so much if she wasn't all the time talking to *me* about it. I think they'll get together this summer. I'll help on the good work if I can. What they need is a cellar — remember that old ice-cellar out on the farm?" Jack's vociferous laughter suddenly echoed from the walls. "If I could get 'em in there, I'd have 'em for better or worse!"

Mrs. Flood understood nothing of this allusion, and the prospect of losing Richard rather terrified her; but the sound of that ringing laugh made her heart dance with pleasure. Surely it was one of her festive days when her son-in-law laughed in her room so joyously.

Jack slowly finished his repast. "Ever read any of that stuff Richard's always writing?"

"She has read her book to me — the book she's just had published, the one she's worked on for I don't know how long."

He rose. "What do you think of it? See any signs of a gold mine in it?"

"I wouldn't say it to anybody, but to you or Minna," she answered in a cautious voice, "but I'm afraid it'll never sell. You see, it doesn't sound like a book, at all. It's just like you and me talking here in the room."

"I thought so!" he exclaimed, with a nod. "You can't expect anybody living around here to do the real thing. If a book doesn't sound like a *book*, how is it going to take any rank? I might as well listen to my own voice as read

about a chap that talks in my strain. Yes, she'll never be anything but a servant, unless Alfred marries her. Now, before I go —"

He came around and stood in front of her. "Mother, we're going to make a change. We haven't said anything to you because we didn't want to bother you with our troubles —"

She cried out, impulsively, "But that's what I want to know — your troubles, your plans. Don't you understand that everything Minna and you do or think of doing —"

"Of course, but you're not strong, and it's not right, at your time of life, to be bothering about us young folks. But we're going to make a change."

"Not a bad change, I'm sure," she faltered, clasping her hands unconsciously.

"It's an awful change to me, I can tell you. I'm going to work."

"Oh, Jack!"

"Yes, that's what I say to myself. But you see, I *have* to."

"Like the real-estate office you talked of opening?"

"No, I mean hard digging. Mother, we've got to sell the house —"

"Oh, Jack!"

"Yes, you're right, it is, '*Oh, Jack!*' But I should have been hard at it long ago. I've nobody to blame but myself. The trouble was, I didn't want to go into business till I found something congenial. A fellow can't do himself justice unless his work is congenial. But, Mother, between you and me, I don't believe there is any — so I'm going to do the first thing at hand. I've drawn one hundred and sixty acres in Oklahoma and we'll go out there and settle on it like two poor little lonesome bees."

"Oklahoma! You'll take Minna away out there?"

"She's true blue and more anxious to rough it than I am! We'll put up a shack and go to digging — all this fine life must be cut out, and we must do the cutting before it swamps us. Yes, ma'am, we've been to France, now let us die in Oklahoma!"

Mrs. Flood started to her feet. "Take me

with you!" she cried. "I didn't belong to your gay life in town, I wasn't able to keep up with it, but out on a farm — out there — anywhere with Minna —"

"Do you think we'd hear of it?" he exclaimed, reproachfully. "Why, Mother, you are no longer young. Such hardships would kill you."

"Oh, no, they wouldn't. There isn't any hardship like being separated from my child."

"It's awfully good of you to feel that way. But we are young, we can stand it — you couldn't. It isn't the life for you. No, here you are quiet and waited on —"

"Jack, listen to me: *Let me go!* I don't want to be waited on — I'll wait on you. There's lots of strength in me yet, if I could be with you and Minna. I don't want to live in quiet, I want to go out there —" She paused, quivering with the intensity of her desire.

"Don't you worry, Mother," he said soothingly. "It'll be all right. It'll be all right. We are young, and it's a young world out there,

and when we've fought our way and made a good, comfortable home — in a few years — we'll come for you. We young folks have to shoulder our own burdens, because you wouldn't understand. But when we've got a nice place, if you are living, you shall sure have the best room in the house and the best things to eat."

"I don't want a good room. A crust would satisfy me, if — if — if —"

"I'm proud for you to feel like that, but we mustn't let you sacrifice yourself. Anyway, Minna will see you before we go, of course. We wouldn't think of leaving without a farewell visit. I oughtn't to have disturbed you with this news at all. It wasn't to be told, yet. I guess those strawberries mellowed me up and made me a little too confidential. Forget all about it, and try to be surprised when Minna breaks the news."

Before Mrs. Flood could calm herself, a servant — not Richard — announced that a gentleman in the parlor waited to see her, and it was by her earnest persuasion that Jack was induced to accompany her below.

"My minister, perhaps," said Mrs. Flood, a little proudly. "Or that man that's getting up a history of the county—oh, I have my callers as well as other people!" She was delighted that somebody should have called for her while he was there; it would do to tell Minna as a proof that she was not without her diversions at the Home. This small social triumph took away for a moment the sting of Jack's involuntary disclosure.

B. M. Gridge, pale and stern, was waiting near the door with a small box in his hand. A look of relief at sight of Jack flashed over his face which instantly became hard and void of light.

"Glad you happened to be here, Jack . . . No, thank you, ma'am, I can't sit down—haven't time. Came on business. I'm not very good at explaining, but you'll remember that diamond butterfly I gave you eight years ago, when you sold the farm—the pin, you know, from Zack. Well, you see—" He suddenly bit his lip, uncertain how to proceed.

Mrs. Flood had sunk in a chair smitten by undefined presentiments. Her husband's name, seldom heard, pronounced now by his bosom friend — the recollection of the mystery attending the presentation of the pin — that box clutched in the bloodless hand — and this unwonted visit. . . . Surely — but how could that be? Thus her agitated mind leaped from point to point of the dark unknown, while Jack saw only the immediate present.

“Sure,” Jack nodded. “Minna will show that pin at the party, to-night.”

Mrs. Flood made a violent effort to compose herself, fearful that her son-in-law would credit her weakness to old age. “I suppose Juanita will be there, too,” she said, a little tremulously. “They say it's the event of the season — the climax of all the Ladies' Card Parties.” Her eagerness to show herself posted in the fashionable news of the day smote upon even Jack's sensibilities.

“No,” said Gridge, abruptly, “Juanita will not be there.” Something like a threat sounded in his heavy voice.

Jack raised his head quickly. He did not like that tone applied to dear little Juanita.

"Oh, is she ill?" faltered Mrs. Flood. Then suddenly she cried out, "Mr. Gridge, do you know anything? — Have you heard —?" She caught her breath.

"This box is for you." He placed it in her lap. "It's from him. He —"

Jack caught her as she was about to fall. The box slipped to the floor and was jarred open. The glittering bracelet was revealed.

"We're all right, Mother," said Jack, softly, "we're all right, now. Here is the present — magnificent's no word for it!"

He put the ornament in her hand, but she looked at Gridge, unblinkingly. "Have you seen him? Is he — did he come —"

"He made me promise not to explain how the gift reached me," said Gridge. "I promised on my honor; that's why I can't tell you more."

"But you'll tell me more than just those few words, won't you?"

"I'm sorry I can't."

"If he is here — in town — if he brought the box and gave it to you, somebody must have seen him. . . . Doesn't he want me *ever* to know where he is, or what he is doing?"

"I haven't seen him for years — there's no harm in saying that much."

"But wasn't there a postmark on the wrapper? Or if it came by express —"

"I haven't any idea where your husband is Mrs. Flood, none."

"You see, he's alive. He's alive, Jack, he's alive and — and he's thinking of me!"

Gridge was troubled that she should build up false hopes. "Mrs. Flood, there's no knowing. He might have left this bracelet in the care of some one, when he first went away. I wouldn't set my heart too much on thinking anything else but that — that perhaps some bank or institution has had this trinket the past ten years."

"But I wouldn't be here if that were so," cried the other, eagerly. "I wouldn't be here if he'd left it with anybody in trust. Don't you see? Would I, Jack? Because when they

found out I was going to the Home, they'd have sent the bracelet, or the money it's worth. You see that!"

Gridge dropped his head and muttered something they could not hear.

"Oh, yes, he's alive," she cried, excitedly. "You see, I wanted to come to the Home because this is the very place for me — I feel I'm not in the way because it was built for old people. But the world doesn't understand. I remember when *I* had a wrong idea about Homes; I imagined they were for — for neglected folks, you know. And if the bracelet had been left for me in somebody's care, he'd have sent it just as soon as he heard I was here. Because he wouldn't have understood. If it had been left in a friend's trust, or in a bank, it would have been the friend's business to keep posted about me, and he'd have known when I was sent — when I came to the Home. But Zack went away and cut himself off from us all, and he's just heard about me, so he sends the bracelet — and I expect he'll come, himself before long. Oh!" she stared up wildly.

"It's so clear — there can't be any mistake — he's alive and — and he's found out about me — he's just heard —" She flung her arms about Jack's neck, and sobbed in complete abandonment. "He's alive! And he cares for me — he thinks about me — and — and he'll come — he must be coming, he wouldn't send the bracelet and leave me to die without knowing more, without seeing him, without holding his hand once more — that strong, rough, faithful hand. . . . He wanted me to go with him — it nearly killed him because I couldn't (but how could I leave Minna?) and now he's coming to me!"

Gridge turned away, his hands covering his face, and his burly form shook convulsively.

"There, there, Mother, dear!" Jack patted her and whispered soothingly, as to a very little child, "It will all be right." The mist was in his eyes.

"Take the bracelet, Jack!" she cried in sudden thought. "Sell it. Here — it's yours. Now you won't have to go to Oklahoma, will you? You needn't take Minna away

from me, you see! What is such an ornament worth?"

"A thousand dollars," Gridge told her.

"You hear that?"

"It might tide us over the riffle," Jack acknowledged, "for a little while. But it won't last much longer than snow in summer. No, you keep it, Mother —"

"If it will hold you near me for just a few months, that's all I ask. Life's so uncertain at my age — I may not live longer than the money'll last. And then, Zack's coming home, I know, I feel it, I feel it! If you must go, if Minna is to live in another state, there wouldn't be anything in life, anyway — unless Zack comes home. But there'll be so much more in life than I ever knew or even dreamed about — when Zack comes home! I won't seem old to Zack, and he'll have the notion that all my life hasn't been lived; he always argued that a person should go ahead as if he was to live forever. He'll want to fix up a little house for us, I expect, and have a cow and horse and chickens and a garden — I know you think I'm

talking foolishly, and I guess I am, I feel so light-headed, as if I were a girl . . . so I'll not talk that way any more, for Old People's Homes are not places for girls."

Jack looked over her head at Gridge with questioning eyes. Gridge slowly shook his head to indicate that there was no reason to suppose Zack Flood living — much, indeed, to conclude the contrary. Jack held up a warning finger: it was as well for her to delude herself with the fancy. See how tearfully happy the idea had made her! Let her think so to the end, said Jack's finger — perhaps the end was not so very far away, as she had said.

When Jack went out to his buggy, he took the third diamond with him, little suspecting that it was the third. Gridge had already leaped upon his horse and dashed away, vainly seeking to adjust his thoughts to the failure that would shock the community with the morrow's dawn. Mrs. Flood crept back to her room, and laughed and cried with broken ejaculations, with plaintive moaning.

There was nobody to put her arms about

her like a daughter and draw her gray hair to a loving breast, nobody to bathe her face, and kneel at her side, listening to the torrent of words that told unconsciously of ten years of starved love, of heart-broken longings, of hope that dared not hope, of waiting that was ever dumb lest others grieve to know she still believed her husband would return; and, at a later hour, there was nobody to imprint a good-night kiss upon her forehead, and encourage her to dream her sweetest dreams of hope, and to assure her that whoever came or went, one faithful soul would be true to her till death.

Nobody,— but Richard.

CHAPTER XVI

JUANITA'S KISS

JACK PALMER felt depressed as he drove out of sight of the Home for Old People — of course he could not stay with his mother-in-law all the time, nor could she expect such a thing, but it saddened him to reflect that in her necessary isolation she must often feel lonely. There was nothing to be done about it; old age comes and one is thereby removed from any part in the world of to-day; it was lucky there were such asylums as Old People's Homes since there was no place for her in young people's homes, and yet it was a pity. Jack breathed a deep sigh at the cruelty of life.

His sorrow was almost a luxury because he knew that when he chose to put it aside, happiness lay before him, and while indulging it, he felt disinterestedly generous. At the end of the first mile he had almost forgotten Mrs.

Flood in his satisfaction over the diamond bracelet. There would be no use to show it to Minna, because she would want to wear it, whereas clearly it should be sold to keep them longer in Pendleton. That was Mrs. Flood's wish and it should be respected, since the gift came from her — and it would put off that horrible prospect of going to work — and, then, it would enable him to enjoy for some months longer — possibly all summer — the friendship, the near, close friendship of Juanita.

Jack never found himself wishing that he had married Juanita — doubtless he thought more of her because he had not. Ten years with Minna had taught him just how she would look and just what she would say in any of the little stock situations of daily life, but about Juanita you could never tell. What she liked yesterday she didn't like to-day and her convictions of to-day could not be guaranteed beyond sunset. Jack was not so much charmed by her different phases as interested in their swift development, their gay evanescence. On that wonderful voyage to Europe, how she had

laughed and sung, how she had bloomed in the salt air — and in the absence of her husband! How could she endure that coarse-fibred, heavy-witted, dull-eyed B. M. Gridge? And it was for life! Jack felt sorrier for Juanita than for any one he had ever known, even himself. She was so little, so dainty, so pretty — and Gridge had habits to drive one mad, just little things, but eternally coming into evidence — such as taking his coffee from his saucer. And he had a tooth with which he could not dwell in peace. Jack squirmed in the buggy as he remembered the torture he had endured from its incessant visitations. What must Juanita have suffered?

“Poor little Juanita!” Jack thought he would drop around and see her that very evening — after his wife was safely off to the Ladies’ Card Club. Gridge had announced so oddly that she would not attend the party, evidently it was no case of illness; there must have been a quarrel — and heaven knew there was sufficient grounds for one. Jack himself could have picked a quarrel with Gridge just because he was Gridge,— and Juanita’s husband. Yes, he

would go around — it was only next door, there would be no formality, he would simply express surprise that she had withheld her presence from the event of the season — the gayest possible function from which men were debarred. And then, perhaps, she would tell him the reason, would confide in him her wrongs,— for she was very confiding,— would look up into his eyes with that gaze that always seemed incongruously deep and soulful for such a sweet little creature. Poor Juanita! yes, he must see her that evening and cheer her up.

Nobody could cheer her up like Jack. She had told him so — he smiled indulgently as he drove on through the gathering dusk. She had never got over her sentiment for him, he was afraid, but that did not make their friendship any less charming. While Minna was away at college, he had even fancied himself in love with her — and during their engagement they had acted toward each other like real lovers. He liked to think about those young days when kisses bloomed in the warm spring evenings be-

cause love was in its flower. No kisses now, to be sure, since every one was proper in Pendleton! but often when he sat beside her, those caresses of past years rustled in his memory like dried roseleaves in a drawer.

“Ha!” cried Jack, “this is something like!” It was two hours later and he had drawn up his chair opposite Juanita’s by the open window. Over the sill floated the fragrance of the warm night, and from across the street, an arc-lamp shed sufficient light to reveal the pale presence and suggest the quaint charm of the woman he had once loved. “Something like” was Jack’s equivalent for this perfumed semi-darkness, this nearness of tantalizing womanhood, and the blissful assurance that B. M. Gridge was somewhere else. Of course, had B. M. Gridge been there, he would have insisted, stupidly, on blinding them with prosaic house-lights, and he would have felt obliged to take a part in the conversation, sterilizing it with politics and business.

"What! all in the dark," he would have exclaimed. Then *click!* — Oh, that B. M. Gridge was such a bore! Poor Juanita!

Before she knew it, she was telling him all her troubles; and before Jack knew it, he was, in his big, awkward, handsome way, consoling her with a voice that breathed lullabies and a hand that could not keep away.

"We are ruined — and to-morrow everybody will know it — he hasn't trusted me, Jack, he hasn't been true to me, letting all this hideous disgrace swoop upon me unprepared — no, he hasn't loved me; I thought he did but I've been deceived, for if he loved me, wouldn't he have given me his confidence? Didn't I tell him all about you, and how we were all in all to each other once? Yes, and how you used to — but never mind, it is over. Anyway, I told him my secrets and he hasn't told me a thing. No, he doesn't love me — and — and I don't love him, — *there!* Isn't it horrible!"

"Oh, yes, you do, Juanita, of course you do."

"Of course I don't. After this failure? No! Love him? *Him?*"

"Oh, yes, you do!" He did not know what else to say, so he said it again: "Oh, yes, you do, Juanita — little Juanita!"

"I don't, and you know I don't. *There!*" And she covered her face with her little hands and shook gently. Heavens! How sweet the flowers smelled as the June breeze sent their fragrance in delicious puffs over Juanita's head to Jack's burning brow! As he inhaled, he seemed breathing in Juanita, as if all out-door perfume came from her flower-self.

"And what will we do!" she said, clasping her hands. "The store is shut up for good; this house will be auctioned off, and he is too *old* to start life all over — he's too *old*. Do you know how old he is? A man like that who has lived his life and fails in all his responsibilities to his wife — fails from lack of business-sense — there's no *place* for him in this world, no place except something like that Old People's Home. . . . That's where he ought to be. Yes, I know I'm bitter, but I don't care. He has ruined my life and this is worse than death."

"This is sure a stunner!" Jack admitted.

"I imagined B. M. was rolling in wealth, whereas he and I might go into partnership in misfortune. I've got nothing, either — I'm just where he is — except that I haven't worked myself to death, that's one thing nobody will ever reproach me for. Look! Juanita, this is the only difference between your fortune and mine —" And he drew forth the diamond bracelet.

"Oh, oh!" cried Juanita, as the distant light caused it to burn, like a tiny star fallen through the dusky night. "How perfectly — gorgeous!" She slipped it upon her arm.

"That'll keep us floating awhile," Jack admitted, "but we'll soon have to pull up and go out West."

"And *we* won't have enough to take us away!" said Juanita, admiring the bracelet. "Oh, Jack, how splendid! Did you get it for —"

"How could *I* buy such a bracelet? No, Minna has never seen it. Mother got it to-day by express from my mysterious father-in-law, and she has given it to me."

As they talked in low tones, the magic of soft, vague light on a woman's face and form deepened upon his senses. It was natural to hold her hand as he talked about the bracelet, it was natural for him to admire the bare arm where the jewel glittered, and it was natural for her admiration of the gem to express itself in the warm handclasp. And then, when the tears came and he sought to show her that all the future was not desolate, it was natural for her little head to droop and find a sturdy support. Minna knew nothing of the diamond as yet and need never see it since it was to be sold at once . . . she could never know how much it was worth except through his telling.

Suppose — suppose he found a place for Gridge out in Oklahoma; then there need be no indefinite separation of the families.

“Don't sell the diamond, Jack!” she urged, suddenly. “Don't sell it! Let your house go as we must let ours — hurry to your new home and send for Mr. Gridge. . . . If we can be together, I'll not feel that life is dead ashes.”

Jack kissed her arm where the bracelet lent magic beauty.

"I thought you'd stay here in your fine house, Jack, and that we'd be driven out into the street — that's why I was so miserable. But if you have failed, our failure is a blessing. It will keep us together. Is it wrong for me to want to see you every day? That's all I ask of life, to be near you. We thought *once* there was much more in life than that, but never mind, we have that, at least. I shouldn't have told you that I do not love my husband, but you knew it, anyway. Didn't you, Jack? Didn't you always know it?"

"Poor Juanita!"

"You knew I married him just from foolish pride, didn't you, Jack?"

"Dear Juanita!"

"And — and O Jack — what shall I do? All these long years . . . and — and what *can* I do? Because — I am so miserable, all the time —"

Her arms were about his neck, now, and their lips met in a fierce, mad kiss. It was the more

passionate, the more prolonged, because from the day of their first kiss, her love had never lessened. Throughout her aimless life that one thing had remained permanent, all-absorbing, and her embrace was the more intense because during these past years she had never once imagined that her secret would be revealed. It was as if one about to suffocate should suddenly break the window of a stifling prison-cell and find one's lungs unexpectedly filled with life-giving air. She was panting, as if at the end of a race, while he held her from the floor in his great arm.

"Jack! Jack! You love me, too! You love me after all. This — this is just the beginning. . . . And we might have — all the time, we might have —" In the free, wild air rushing through her broken prison-window, there thrilled a million voices of ecstatic hope. Her heart surged with strange exaltation as if she had just begun to live.

"Poor, poor Juanita!" He set her feet upon the ground and gently removed her arms. It was no longer "Dear Juanita" even in his

imagination. "We mustn't, you know, it — it won't do, you see." To have saved his life he couldn't have helped kissing her — for years he had tantalized himself with wondering how it would be if their lips met — if he should suddenly seize her in his arms and lift her to his heart as when they were boy and girl. Now he knew how it was, and he was content. He had kissed her again, it was enough. He had felt her arms tighten about his neck and it was like reaching the last word of a delightful story, a story without a sequel, complete in itself.

"Jack!"

"Yes, I know, but you see —" He felt inadequate to the situation.

"You love me, Jack, now I know it. You have betrayed yourself, just as I — and I never meant to tell you, never, never. But before I knew, I was showing you my heart. And I have seen your heart, at last."

"But you see, Juanita — you know very well that — that —"

A heavy step was heard on the porch. "O

Jack, he mustn't find us here all in the darkness — quick, this side door."

"But —"

"But if he comes in, I — you — oh, please hurry, please hurry — he'd read our faces — my face — and he's desperate, to-night — there, he's in the hall! Jack — if you love me!"

She held open a door that led out upon the piazza overlooking the garden.

"No," said Jack, stepping to the wall and switching on the electric light, "I'll take what's coming to me. Close your door, Juanita."

"But I tell you he's mad, to-night — I tell you he's lost his senses."

"Well, I haven't. . . . Not yet. And I'm not going to run away."

CHAPTER XVII

THE DIAMOND BRACELET

GRIDGE opened the door loudly and looked into the room, turning his head from side to side. Juanita had swiftly closed the outer door, but still stood near it, trying to make it appear that she was there by accident, though her cheeks burned, her bosom heaved.

Looking at Jack distrustfully, the merchant asked, "Were you both in the dark? Oh, you needn't have turned on the light for me."

"There was light enough outdoors for us," Jack explained, "but I thought you liked it brighter."

The other came into the room, closing the door. "Where did you get that?" he asked, his eyes riveted upon his wife.

Her eyes were wide open, fixed without understanding.

Gridge pointed at her arm. "That," he said, roughly.

Juanita looked down. She had forgotten the diamond bracelet. She caught her breath. "Oh — that?"

He looked at her as if seeking to pierce her soul with his relentless gaze.

A long pause of absolute stillness; then —

"It's a friend's," she explained, holding up her head as if indignant at some covert taunt. "There are still *some* who trust me and love me — and she —"

"*She?*" echoed her husband, with a sneer.

"Yes, she! My friend insisted on my wearing her bracelet for awhile." Juanita rapidly regained composure as she continued: "I told her I might lose it, I told her you wouldn't think it right just at the time you have failed and haven't a penny in the world, but she insisted — she made me consent."

Gridge turned to Jack: "Nice to have a friend like that, don't you think?" Then to Juanita, with a smile of scorn: "Why, I saw Mrs. Flood give Jack that bracelet not four

hours ago. Zack placed it in my care and it was I who gave it to Mrs. Flood."

Juanita was transfixed. She looked from one to the other, turning red and pale by turns.

"That's right," Jack assented, prosaically.

Gridge laughed, unpleasantly.

"I don't know what you saw given Mr. Palmer, or what you didn't see given him"—already Juanita had rallied bravely—"and I don't care. All I know is that Minna gave me the bracelet to wear. Of course if Mr. Palmer gave her the bracelet, there was nothing to keep her from giving it to me for a little while. I don't know what you mean by your looks and your tone of voice and your way of standing there as if you imagined yourself a judge ready to pronounce some sort of sentence."

"Oh, no," Gridge retorted, "I'm not going to pronounce any sort of sentence, I mean to execute the sentence that your own conscience has pronounced. Minna never gave you that diamond; she is at the party and couldn't have given it to you while I was from home, and I

was here until she left her house. I don't imagine she sent it to you by Jack! I don't think she knows anything about it."

"You mean, then, that I am not telling you the truth, Mr. Gridge?"

"*He* gave you the bracelet! He gave it to you here — in the dark — of course it was light enough for you two — people don't have to turn on the electric light to make such presents." Suddenly his voice trembled with passion: "Juanita, take off that bracelet and throw it at his feet."

She turned scarlet and threw back her head in flashing defiance. "I am not your slave." She held out her arm. "Well, yes, he did give it to me. And it shall stay on my arm until he orders me to return it."

"I have seen this for years," her husband said, slowly. "I thought after our marriage that you'd forget your broken engagement,—broken through no fault of yours. He cared more for Minna, and I believed that would give you some pride if you'd never had any before. That's why I didn't object to your

friendship. I couldn't think you such a fool as to go on caring for a man who cared so little for you. So, although I've seen your petty plays of sentiment for years, although I knew you went to Europe simply because he went, it didn't seem dangerous. I give you my word of honor that had I suspected harm could come of your liking for Jack, I'd have taken you away, or driven him away. Because I knew he never loved you, and my God, how I have loved you — until to-day! ”

“ B. M.,” cried Jack, hotly, “ a fellow can't stand this, you know. Just because I slipped that bracelet on Juanita's arm — ”

“ Take it off! ” cried Gridge, loudly. “ Fling it upon the floor. ” His eyes flashed.

“ Keep it on! ” shouted Jack, stung to desperation. This merchant thought to intimidate *him!*

“ Oh, I'm going to let you have her,” Gridge said, between his teeth, “ just as soon as we can get a divorce. Don't be uneasy about that, Jack; cover her with diamonds from head to foot as soon as she's free — that'll be between

you and Minna. But as long as she's my wife, I swear she'll not wear the jewels of any other man. I'm done with you, Juanita — you showed me your soul to-day and little as you are, it's too small for your body. But we've still got the name of man and wife — Take off that bracelet."

"And I say, no, no, no! That bracelet comes off only on one condition — that the one who gave it to me asks it back. And I've nothing else to say to you."

"Then he must ask it back."

"Must I?" cried Jack. "Well, I think not! No, keep it, Juanita."

"He doesn't love you, Juanita. He never did. And he's telling you to keep that bracelet through pure obstinacy. Are you going to let one of us be killed before your eyes, on account of that trinket? — for both of us can't live if it stays on your arm." Despite his level voice, his steady hand, his slow movements, he gave an impression of intensity difficult to explain. It was the stranger because found in a man naturally commonplace, but he burned none

the less fiercely because the kindling had been slow.

Juanita smiled at him scornfully, not comprehending. "Oh, is it as bad as that?" she mocked.

"And you," exclaimed her husband, turning upon Jack, "can be false to a woman like Minna for a creature like that! But please wait until the courts set us free. Will you ask back that bracelet?"

"No, I'll not ask it back. She shall have it. She shall keep it, yes, forever. It's hers. I give it to her. And what are you going to do about it? You failed in business and that's made you crazy. You come here insulting your wife and insulting me and insulting Minna, and I'm not going to stand it. I've been patient with you, but there are some things that a man can't endure."

Gridge drew his revolver, causing Juanita to utter a scream which drowned the peal of the doorbell, and the sound of footsteps.

"I haven't anything to live for," Gridge said, grimly. "You have two women to look

after, it seems; I don't know but your part is the worse. We'll leave it to Juanita: Here, my wife, take the weapon and hand it to the one you choose, husband or lover—you will do admirably for an impartial judge! . . . Oh, no, I see you mean to fling it out the window. That won't do. Will you draw straws, Jack?"

"Gridge, you're a fool."

"Oh, yes, all three of us are fools. There are very few wise men nowadays. When I first realized that we were utterly ruined, I got my pistol—but there was Juanita and I was fool enough to think she might stand by me, so I didn't kill myself—for her sake! But she's fool enough to love a man that doesn't care for her—and you are fool enough to hold your tongue when a word would save a life and a double dishonor."

At the other's contemptuous smile, he lost all self-control. "Jack, you think you know me, but you're mistaken. I offered you a chance, and you wouldn't take it. I'm quite desperate, I don't care what I do. Perhaps as you say,

I'm crazy; it's certain that the longer I see that devil's glitter on my wife's arm, the nearer I find myself about to kill you where you stand." The last words came through clenched teeth.

"Wait!" cried Juanita, in wild haste. "I will take it off." She wrenched at the bracelet but it defied her quivering fingers. She uttered a terrified shriek as the weapon was raised, while Jack, pale but seemingly composed, with folded arms, big and handsome, stood looking his enemy in the eye.

The door was opened by the maid, but at sound of the terrified cry two arrivals, lingering behind, brushed past her into the room. One was Minna Palmer in her party-dress. The other was her father.

Jack, not daring to release Gridge from his steady gaze, was subtly aware of his wife's presence, and his mind leapt back to the day when he had stood facing her father's gun, ten years ago.

CHAPTER XVIII

FACE TO FACE

MINNA, still dazed by the sudden appearance of her father at the Ladies' Card Club, as by the apparition of one returned from the dead, stared before her uncomprehendingly, but only for a moment. Juanita's scream had sounded terror — the pistol in Gridge's hand must have been the cause of it. That any one in a well-appointed drawing-room should have in his possession a weapon, much more that he should hold it in threatening attitude, seemed as fantastic as an incongruous nightmare wherein savagery and civilization go arm-in-arm. But in a flash of thought every consideration was burned from her consciousness save the vital fact of her husband's danger.

She rushed to where Jack stood with his back to the open window, and threw her arms about

him, thus interposing her body between him and danger. That is what Juanita would like to have done, if she had not been afraid the pistol might explode. Minna thought only that if it did, the bullet must penetrate her own flesh before it could harm her darling.

She looked at Gridge from over her shoulder. "Oh, you wicked man!" she cried, fiercely. "*You!* Have you lost your senses? Oh, you wicked man!" There was such passion of indignation in her deepened voice that Gridge, who had already lowered the weapon, hung his head, ashamed. Matters stood precisely as before, and yet everything seemed changed by her attitude of supreme devotion. He no longer wanted to kill Jack, or to die — in the supreme moment, anything might have happened to furnish lifelong remorse, but that moment was gone forever and his bewildered brain sought for some plausible explanation of his tragic pose.

Zack Flood, saved from recognition by his long beard, his mass of unkempt hair, his stooping form, his workman's clothes, coughing

loudly as he moved, shut the door that the servants might not overhear.

"After all our kindness to you!" Minna still addressed B. M. Gridge. "After all we have done — listening to your long stories and making you welcome whenever you came — and we thought you such a *good* man, so harmless and — and retiring! And look at you, to-night, a highwayman. . . . With that pistol —"

"I was — I was just showing it to Jack," faltered Gridge, bending before the storm.

"Show it to *me*," said Zack Flood, stepping forward.

"Yes," cried Minna, "give that horrid thing to Father — how can we draw a free breath while it's in your hand? Oh, oh, you *wicked* man!"

"Give it to — *your father?*" faltered Gridge, shrinking back.

"Yes, that's me," said Zack, taking the weapon from the nerveless hand. "No wonder you don't recognize me —" he stopped to cough violently. "Oh, my back — my back!"

I'm not good for this world, I reckon. You must have had a sort of premonition when we met out on the farm — Porter's farm that was once *Palmer's* farm. But of course you couldn't know your old friend — such a wreck — one foot in the grave . . .” He bent almost double with his racking cough from which he had been singularly free that afternoon.

“My God!” muttered Gridge, retreating farther.

“But I say!” cried Jack, putting his wife aside, “this can't be your father can it, Minna? Why, your father was entirely unlike this —”

“I'm changed,” Zack coughed. “Oh, my back, my back! We're all miserable mortals. I'm here to live with you, children, to be taken care of in my old age. Isn't *anybody* glad to see me? Not one hand stretched forth in welcome! Oh, my back! When I went to your house and they told me Minna was at the party, I couldn't wait, I was so eager to see her. But she wasn't eager to see me.” He

shook his head. "I think she's sorry I came. She was in the middle of a game of cards. That game will never be finished — such a pity, such a pity!"

"By George!" muttered Jack, looking upon the disreputable figure in the greatest perturbation. "What on earth are we to do, Minna?"

"Do?" The old man caught at the word. "There's nothing to do but give me a place at your table and a warm corner by your fireside when the winter winds howl. Oh, there's nothing to do — I'll not last long, I dare say. Give me your hand, Jack, and say you are glad to see me."

"Give you my hand? After the way you deserted your wife leaving her to think you dead — and now coming back like a tramp? Well, all right, if Minna stands for it. Of course, if Minna cares to share her last crust with the father that's disgraced her, she may — and we've about come to the last crust, if it's any comfort for you to know."

"Oh, we're all miserable mortals!" whined

the wanderer, turning to Gridge. "Come, B. M.—*you* were my bosom friend; you're glad to see me, aren't you? Let me grasp that honest hand once more, old fellow — oh, my back, my back!"

"If your own children disown you, Flood, don't come to me," stammered Gridge, his face darkening. "I'm ruined — I have nothing. Don't expect me to be true to my friends when nobody is true to me — nobody, I say." He turned upon Juanita. "Leave the room, Juanita!" He grasped her arm. "Go — I must talk to this man alone." He was so mastered by torturing fears that his very form was shrunken.

"Don't make her go, yet!" cried Zack, reaching the halldoor with surprising agility. "Maybe *she'll* give me a kind word — a warm handshake . . . it'll be worth so much to me; I'm getting hungry for a little kindness."

"Stand aside!" Gridge gasped, breathlessly.

"Take your hand from her arm, B. M. Let her at least shake hands with me."

"Let me pass, Mr. Flood," Juanita ex-

citedly commanded. "I have no time for you."

"You see, Father," Minna spoke up with exceeding bitterness, "nobody *can* be glad to see you after the cloud you've cast upon your family. Nobody knows where you've been, or how you've lived; have you come back here expecting the town to throw open their doors? Don't you realize that your presence reminds everybody of the old disgrace?" The tears came to her reproachful eyes.

"Oh, we're all miserable mortals!" mumbled Zack. "Take your hand from her arm, B. M."

"If you don't get out of the way," Gridge said through his teeth, "so Juanita can go through that door, I'll use force."

"Use force? On an old weak man like me?"

Stung to desperation, Gridge shot out his clenched fist. The blow, aimed at the other's shoulder was evaded, and the next moment Gridge was sent reeling back against the wall.

"By George!" Jack exclaimed, with a short

laugh, "that back of yours flies back as if on springs!" The next instant his face lengthened as he caught sight of the diamond bracelet glittering on the freed arm. Then he realized that it was in order to hide that ornament that Gridge had grasped her arm, and that for the same reason Juanita had tamely submitted.

She would have darted through the door had not Flood stood in the way. As the latter looked at Gridge who remained motionless against the wall where he had been thrust, Zack forgot to stoop or cough. There was in the wanderer's eyes a look that burned to the depth of the merchant's soul.

"You have given your wife a pretty bracelet," he said, his voice sounding out clear and vibrant. "And it is one I have seen before." He wheeled upon Juanita so suddenly that she turned deathly pale. "Did you know that I had seen it before?"

"Yes." The faint assent was forced from her frightened lips.

Minna looked in bewilderment at Jack and was astonished to find him turning red.

Where could Juanita have got such a valuable bracelet on the night before her husband's failure? Oh, that wicked B. M. Gridge, to go into bankruptcy while his wife was decked with jewels!

Zack held Juanita with his relentless eyes: "Did you know I gave that bracelet to your husband in trust for my wife?"

Again her answer came faint, mechanical, "Not at first."

"But you took it from him, you are wearing it while my wife, for whom it was intended, is out there — shut up in that Home!"

Juanita was mute.

"Intended for Mother?" exclaimed Minna. "The bracelet was left for Mother? You hear that, Jack? Oh — I begin to understand . . . but who could have imagined that Juanita would stoop so low! No wonder Mr. Gridge draws his revolvers and threatens to kill everybody. Juanita, oh, Juanita, how I have been deceived in you! — taking the diamond — and Mr. Gridge giving it to you — the diamond that belongs to *Mother*. My poor, dear

mother, how she has been deceived . . . how I have been deceived — and Jack!”

“Yes!” her father cried, “and if I’d never come back, you’d never have known. They’d have kept it, those two — my friend and his wife. And to think that I used to believe in friendship!” Suddenly he remembered the part he had intended to preserve. “But, oh, my back — my back! This is too much excitement for a worn-out wretch like me, far too much. You’re glad I came now, I hope, my children. You’ll shelter me, I know. I’ve returned to make my home with you till I die.”

“Get the bracelet from her, Jack,” cried Minna, her eyes flashing.

“Minna, you’ll let me live with you, won’t you, my daughter?”

“She whom I thought my friend!” Minna flashed. “I don’t know her. No wonder she looks so strange! Get that bracelet, Jack!”

“You can’t live with us, Mr. Flood,” expostulated Jack, not daring to look at Juanita. “We’re going to rough it in Oklahoma on our quarter-section. But I’ll do my best to get you

in where your wife is, although the Home is crowded. We'll do what we can for you."

"Oh, thank you, son-in-law, you are just the same, you haven't changed a mite! But are you going to let Juanita keep that bracelet? — she hasn't shame enough to give it up! Minna wears the diamond butterfly, I see. Of course her mother gave it to her, but where's the diamond necklace?"

The merchant uttered a groan and cowered back in an agony of remorse.

"The necklace!" echoed Minna, her eyes blazing. "She had that, too! Oh, I see! So *that* was mother's, as well? Juanita wore it till she sold it to raise enough to take her to Europe. You see, sir," turning upon her father, "what your wandering the face of the earth has done for Mr. Gridge — you have been supporting his wife, buying her pleasures — it was very generous of you — while your own daughter was mortified half to death!"

"Is this true?" Juanita turned upon her husband a face oddly sharp in all its lines. "Was that necklace stolen, also?"

"Why do you say 'stolen *also* '?" exclaimed Gridge, stung to desperation. "I never gave you that bracelet."

"Oh, you didn't!" she retorted. "Then how came it on my arm?"

Jack paled with sudden hope.

"Juanita!" cried her husband. "My God, how I have been deceived in you!"

"I think we are all more or less deceived in one another," remarked Zack Flood, "and all more or less guilty. So you gave my jewels to your wife, did you, B. M.?"

"I let her wear the necklace — there seemed no harm in that, until Mrs. Flood should need it, according to your instructions. When she sold it to raise money for her voyage, I saw no harm in that, either, meaning to refund; but I've had bad luck for years. Everything goes wrong and now I'm ruined. I swear to you I had no other thought but to pay back — and now I can't, and as I can't, it's as Juanita said — I stole . . . I'm a thief! When I saw how it was ending, I bought the pistol meaning to put an end to myself as well; perhaps I

should, if you and Minna hadn't come when you did."

"Sorry I interrupted any of your plans," said Zack, grimly. "When you told me, out on Porter's farm — that used to be the *Palmer* farm — how you'd been given only *one* diamond, the butterfly, I suspected what had happened — that's why I came to town — couldn't wait. And it seems I'm in time to capture the bracelet before Juanita goes to some foreign land on *it*."

"I say, Mr. Flood," interposed Jack, in desperation, "you're too hard on Gridge, you know. About the necklace, it's between him and you. But as for this bracelet, he gave it to Mother all right, this very evening — after he'd had his talk with you, I suppose. And Mother gave it to me. Understand?"

Minna looked at him blankly. "*I don't understand, at all.*"

"It's very simple," Jack protested.

Juanita flashed a warning glance at him and said, "He wants to shield Mr. Gridge, I suppose."

"He need not," Gridge declared, drawing himself up. "I deserve the punishment, and I'll take it in silence."

"Yes, but I've got myself to consider, you know," Jack explained, "my own conscience. I gave Juanita that bracelet and I can't keep still any longer and have people accusing Gridge of giving it to her. I've no defense to make of Gridge about the necklace — he was a scoundrel, pure and simple; but I'm not exactly blameless myself, about the bracelet. I see that now. At the time I — I was thinking of something else — *not* the moral point of view. But I see it now. I shouldn't have let Juanita have the bracelet. You see, I was just showing it to her, and she tried it on. That's how she came by it, she was trying it on. Gridge came here and made such a scene that I got stubborn, but that was all it amounted to, she was trying it on."

"Jack!" His wife grew frightfully pale. "You didn't come here with that bracelet because you — because you — because you *care* for . . ."

"I've never cared for anybody but you, Minna, and you know it."

"I couldn't bear it, Jack — I should die if you — you, *too*. . . . Father failed me, and now if *you* —"

"But, my darling, there was nothing of the kind. Don't look so frightened, everything is all right. You are all in all to me, and I couldn't care for anybody else if I wanted to. I might try — I might deceive myself with the idea that somebody else was more attractive in a certain sort of way — but it wouldn't be any use. Because I love you, don't you see? It's a question of *love*, with us. We're just suited to each other. Juanita tried it on, that's all."

Juanita tore the bracelet from her arm, and flung it at his feet. After that one frantic effort of strength, she seemed about to fall. Then she made a step toward B. M. Gridge. "You see . . . how you were mistaken," she stammered, with a little shiver.

Jack picked up the bracelet and fitted it to Minna's arm. Her bosom was heaving with

tempestuous sobs, but she threw her arms about him in passionate joy.

"She's nothing to you, is she, Jack?"

"Nobody's anything to me but you, dear. Out yonder in Oklahoma we'll have each other and we'll get away from all this confounded complication, and there you'll be happy and I'll work — oh, Lord!"

"And *I*?" cried Zack, beginning to cough.

"The Old People's Home's for you, I guess," remarked Jack, "unless you can dig up some more diamonds. There, there, Minna, everything's all right — everything's bound to be, you know. It always *has* been; don't worry. Juanita just tried it on."

"But, oh, Jack — oh, Jack, I'm afraid you — that you tried it on just a little, yourself!"

"But I don't see why you can't cheer up, dear, when everything's all right. If there was anything to cry about, I'd cry too. There — there!" He patted her affectionately, immensely relieved that the break with Juanita was now irreparable. Why he had spent so many hours dreaming of her childish charms,

why he had been on the verge of ruining himself and breaking Minna's heart for one kiss of those lips that could never again stir his imagination, for one embrace of that form that had miraculously lost all appeal, was so far beyond comprehension that in his bewildered state the old reliable love of Minna seemed the only firm ground for his feet. He stood upon that ground, therefore, and he maintained it, letting the consequences to others be what they might.

The same reckless pride that had prompted Juanita to marry another when her girlhood's lover failed her, now caused her to draw near her husband. Her face was still white and set, her voice hard and somewhat shrill, her eyes steel-like, while only the curve of her mouth which pain cut downward and a resolute will held unquivering, told of her crushed spirit.

"I shall share your failure, Mr. Gridge," she said, "for we are both failures. We'll take up life again. I know, at your age, it'll be very hard for you, but I can help —"

"You!" he retorted fiercely. "No! That

is all settled. I shall go my way alone. I understand you now, Juanita, I know what you are."

"Well," remarked Zack, "and she knows what you are; seems to me it's a bargain, Gridge. Better take it. Lots of misery'd be spared if we'd remember our own failings while we're abusing other people. Think of that necklace and then set yourself up for virtue, if you can! Say to your wife that whatever faults she's committed, *you* can't afford to reproach her with them, since you're a thief. And that's not a pleasant word, you'll admit. As for my son-in-law, very evidently he's not in a position to act the high and noble judge. As for me — oh, my back, my back! — coming here in my poverty and weakness and venerable old age, being next door to sixty — I admit freely that I was a fool to go away and a bigger fool to stay away; but the biggest fool is the man that comes back as from the grave, expecting welcome. I'm that man. But there's one comfort. Although none of you would shake hands with me when I came, be-

cause you felt yourselves so much better, we've found out that one is about as blamable as the other — I imagine that's the rule in life, only it isn't always found out. I've been a wretch, I own; but there's nobody here who can throw the first stone."

"Zack," exclaimed Gridge, impulsively, "I'm not worthy, but if you'll take this hand, God knows how I shall bless you and take fresh courage. It isn't as if I meant to wrong you about that necklace. And though I was tempted to sell the bracelet I — well, I resisted; isn't that something?"

"I'll take your hand, Gridge, and forgive all the past, if you'll give your other hand to Juanita. I'm not saying she deserves it — we are all miserable mortals, and don't deserve half we get."

"Then *I* shall throw the first stone!" exclaimed Minna, flashing a disdainful glance at Juanita's hand in that of her husband. "You try to put us all in the wrong, Father, so we'll not reproach you for deserting us — for letting the neighborhood gossip about us — breaking

my poor mother's heart. But somebody ought to show you what a terrible wrong you have done your family and I shall tell you, yes, I can speak openly! "

"You, Daughter, least of all, can throw the first stone," replied Zack, his eyes flashing. "Where is your mother?" Before his penetrating gaze her eyes fell. With form no longer bent, with face touched by calm authority, he waited for her to speak.

"But she *wanted* to be out there — it was her wish," Minna faltered.

"Her wish! Your mother never had a wish except for your happiness. She found out it relieved you to be rid of her — that she was a burden to you when in your house. So she let herself be shut up in that prison because it was *your* wish. She's starving there for a sight of you, for the sound of your voice — and you give your smiles to strangers, you lavish your charms on people who care nothing for you except as they need you at cards, or in the ball-room. She would give her life to spare you pain, but you are too selfish to take a five-mile

drive that she may be made happy at the mere sight of you. And now you are planning to go to Oklahoma with no more thought of her desolate loneliness than if she were already in her grave. And all the time you deceive yourself, saying that she is old and mustn't be disturbed by your troubles, though in your heart you must know that those who have no troubles to worry about, are already dead. You know, or should know, that what interests you is the only thing that could interest her. She let you swallow up her farm that you might live in ease — she gave you the diamonds — she'd give you herself, only you don't want her! She refused to go with me, though I knew how it would be, and begged and implored her to go. If she died, the world would be just what it is now, to you; but if you died, did you ever wonder how she would feel? Oh, no, Minna, let anybody else reproach me, but not you — not you!"

"But, Father," said Minna, piteously, "you don't understand. You are so bitter and cruel, because you don't understand. The world

isn't what it was when you were young and — and — mother *wants* to be out there, because it's — she feels that it's the place for her." She began to sob.

"Well," said Zack, shortly, "it's not the place for me, I understand that much! I guess this isn't a world for old people, anyway. You young folks just sort of rent it out to us, temporarily, so to speak." He moved toward the door. "But I must ride back to the Porter farm — that was *Palmer's*, you know — for I'll have to be up early at my milking before I can get over to the Home to see your mother. Yes, I've got a job at the Porters'; lucky, I think! Milking cows beats sitting up and being an Inmate, to my way of thinking."

Jack and Minna followed him out of the house to where his horse was fastened to the post. "Come and stay all night with us, Mr. Flood," said Jack, heartily. "And Minna can ride out to the Home with you to-morrow and talk it all over, and you'll see it in the true light."

"And, Father," added Minna, between her sobs, "it will look *awful* for you to be out at the farm working like an ordinary farmhand. Everybody will wonder and think we oughtn't to allow it. Please, don't. It will be a thousand times worse than it was when you went away."

"I guess I'd better go away again — and stay. I'm thinking of it." He mounted the horse with easy grace, then began to cough, muttering,—“Bless that cough, I'd forgotten it! No, thank you, Jack, not to-night. But I'll see you later. Wonder if there'd be any opening for me out in Oklahoma?”

"Yes, there would!" Jack exclaimed, with sudden hopefulness. "You bet! Why, say, there'll be an awful lot of work to be done on our place, and you know all about farming . . ."

"Oh, yes, but my back!"

His son-in-law looked at him with an intelligent twinkle. "Treat it as you do your cough — forget it."

"Jack," said his father-in-law, "there's something in you, after all — and one good thing: whatever there is, comes right to the surface. Good night, Minna, try to get used to the idea."

"Father," Minna returned unsteadily, "I don't know what you mean — you always expressed yourself so queerly (Mother used to notice it, too). I want you to stay right here; it would look so much better —"

"Tell 'em not to look," said Zack, dryly.

"— And I had never thought of Mother as you said — she seemed to belong to the past, don't you know, because when a person is real old and has lived one life — she oughtn't to be burdened with the cares of us young people. . . . You have made me perfectly wretched — I know I shan't sleep all night long."

"Well, Minna, if you should stay awake, remember that *you're* not so young as you used to be. I can see quite a difference!"

He rode away.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RETURN

AS soon as he could be spared from his morning's work, Zack borrowed Mr. Porter's horse and galloped across country to the Old People's Home. Although his heart was bounding with eager impatience, he slowed up as he came in sight of the handsome brick building, and as he walked across the yard, his step was deliberate, his exploring glances cautious.

No wonder Richard, as she met him in the hall, failed to recognize in the stooping figure of bushy whiskers, downcast gaze and hesitating feet, the uncle who had been to her as an impersonation of activity and dauntless resolution.

Without the information imparted by the Porters, neither would he have known the tall, self-reliant woman whose simple dress of serv-

ice made her beauty more remarkable. There was just enough of his sister's look to give to her loveliness a charming touch of familiarity; and it was difficult to preserve his calm exterior and keep in mind the need of revealing himself by slow degrees.

"They tell me," he said, in a faint, old voice, "that a woman is kept here named Mrs. Flood. If that's a fact, I'd like to speak to her."

Richard looked at him, intently. "Mrs. Flood rooms here." She hesitated.

"How is she? Strong enough to talk to a stranger? I don't want to do any harm if her heart's uncertain, though I judge it ought to be fairly well seasoned by now."

"Oh!" exclaimed the other, clasping her hands, "have you come with — with some news . . . ?"

"I think it'll be sort of tidings to her. Yes, young lady, it's about her husband."

"Is he alive?" she demanded, quickly. "Do you know where he is? — I'm his niece. Is he ill?"

"His back isn't what it was, young lady, and he has a cough, sometimes. But he's alive, all right —"

She grasped his hand, convulsively. "And you have come to tell us? God bless you! God bless you! You know my Uncle Zack?"

"I've got a tolerable speaking acquaintance with him."

"Come — this way."

"But oughtn't it to be broken to her gradual, that a man has come to talk about her husband?"

"Oh, no — Aunt Minnie is prepared for more than that. She's been expecting Uncle Zack every hour."

"How on earth can she be expecting *him*?"

"A diamond bracelet came from him yesterday, so she's sure he will follow it. And so you know Uncle Zack! — and he's alive and well! It seems too good to be true." And she clasped his hand warmly as she hurried him toward the staircase.

Mrs. Flood had darkened her room because the glare of the sun against the unshaded house

hurt her eyes; it was perhaps on that account that she failed to recognize her husband even after Richard had left them alone together.

"I hope it won't agitate you, ma'am, to be told of Zack. I wanted the young lady to break it gradual —"

"Oh, no, oh, no, I knew he'd come or send somebody. He sent you, didn't he?" She stood putting her hands tremulously together and drawing them apart, with a mighty effort at composure.

"Well, ma'am, in a way, I may say, yes. But won't you sit down? for I can see plain that you're not strong. From what Zack said, I expected to see a younger woman — I couldn't believe my ears when they said you were in a Home for *old* folks."

She sank upon a chair and tried to sit erect as in former days. "But when is he coming?" she faltered. "And — and, oh, where is he?"

"You see, ma'am, he wanted to know, first, if you'd be willing to so much as look at him, after his leaving the country the way he did."

She drew herself up. "My husband was greatly tried," she returned, with dignity.

"Yes, ma'am, but you see he feels that his keeping out of sight and sound of his family all these years has made him a renegade and he's ashamed —"

"It isn't too late, it isn't too late!" She started up, wildly. "Thank God it isn't too late, yet. But if he doesn't come soon —"

"How can he look you in the eye," cried the stranger, "after his desertion? *He* didn't know it wouldn't be too late. (He wanted me to say all this.) It was his obstinate stubbornness that kept him from writing, or from ever reading a line about this part of the country. You might have been dead and in your grave, and he'd have been down there in Arkansas tinkering away like a fool —"

She staggered toward him, blindly.

"And you in this damned Home —"

"It's Zack!" She was in his arms, laughing and sobbing. "It's Zack!"

He burst into tears. "Oh, Minnie!"

"It is Zack. Oh, hold me close to you —"

close — I've been so lonely — but you've come. *I* knew you'd come, Zack, *I* knew it! I'm going with you wherever *you* go, if it's to starve together."

"But I know you can't forgive me, honey, I can't forgive myself."

"It's not a matter of forgiving, or being forgiven. It's just that you are here — *here!* You'll never leave me again will you, Zack?"

"Not if you'll go with me."

She looked at him with a pathetic attempt at old playfulness. "Suppose I won't leave?"

"Don't try me, honey, don't try me again!"

"No, never again — why, I'd follow you to the ends of the earth. Dear one, you mustn't cry, it'll break my heart. I didn't feel like this at first. Part of me seemed frozen — the part that belonged to you, and I was hard and cold when I thought of you. But after some time — some years — I began to feel an ache, always a dull pain that woke when I woke. Oh, there's nothing like a Home to bring a woman to her senses!"

"Hush, Minnie, I can't bear to hear you say such things — my dear, proud —"

"I'm not proud, I'm as humble as a little child. All I ask is to go with you if you'll let me —"

"I won't have you saying that. It's I who implore you to come with me."

"I'll come!" She sank upon the couch and drew him down beside her. Half an hour passed but it seemed to her that he had just stepped through the door. "When I hold your hand, Zack, it makes me feel you're not going to slip away. You've had a hard time, poor dear — such a lined face, oh, I hate to see all these lines! And that wonderful beard — are you *very* poor? Isn't there some little spot that we can call our home, somewhere, in this big world?"

"I've got the spot, honey."

"With a house on it? A cottage — a cabin — just a roof where we can lay our heads, and a bit of yard that we can call our own? Have you? Oh, Zack! To be at *home* once more — to die *at home*! You don't know how I

felt when I used to think I might not die at home."

"Say *Live* at home. Why, Minnie, we're good for many a year, yet. Of course we can't keep up with the pace of young people, but dang 'em! I'll set a pace of my own. We'll hike out for an old people's world, and live according to our wishes and our ailments. Down there in Arkansas, a fellow can grow whiskers till they sweep the ground and nobody'll want to put him in a cage! — the curiosities all live in the open. You bet, I've got a roof and a bit of yard! Why, Minnie — but tell me about yourself. I'm feeling too good; explain this gray hair and these wrinkles — remind me of my wickedness — for I'm the cause of all your sufferings. As they say in the novels, 'Tell me your story.'"

"There's none to tell, dear. When can we go to your little — to *our* little home? May I say 'our,' Zack?"

"Oh, the villain I've been! Honey, how long was it before you sold the farm? Did you actually hold to it two entire years?"

“Minna wanted to live in town, and they were gone a good deal. I was rather lonesome out there when they were from home — of course there was always Richard, but I didn’t care for her company, then, I didn’t understand her, she was so quiet and odd, you know, with never much to say — and I knew she disapproved of my daughter which made me a little hard toward her, I’m afraid.”

“So you gave Jack the farm. Then in town, you weren’t lonesome, of course?”

“It wasn’t Minna’s fault, Zack. I was too old to know how to take a hand in all the gay doings, and if I’d known how, I wasn’t strong enough, and besides — how could I be gay? No, all that life was for the young — balls and theaters and auto-parties — such breathless haste and sleepless hours! Oh, that’s when I learned to prize Richard — although to tell you the truth, she and I have never been *perfectly* in harmony — it isn’t as if she were a *daughter*: I know she thinks hard of Minna. Richard can’t understand, for she wasn’t raised with plenty of money and never formed a taste

for society. Richard isn't perfect, but she's a mighty fine girl."

"So they put you at last in this institution? And I reckon you're safe from breathless haste out here, where the frogs do the main bulk of the chorus-work!"

"They didn't 'put' me here — it was my choice — I came because — oh, you know why, Zack."

"I hope you won't insist on staying," he remarked, drily. "That little shack of mine is calling to us this minute."

She nestled closer. "You've had a hard time, Zack, such a hard time — these poor rough hands —" She kissed them. "I can hardly wait to go. But won't it be strange, we two old people, setting up housekeeping by ourselves, as if we meant to live forever? If I'd seen Minna every day I'd feel different about it, but it's hardly as if I were *leaving* her, because she's not here to leave — besides, they'll soon be going to Oklahoma. Jack's going to work. There's a fine fellow! He spent a *whole hour* with me yesterday — I wish you

could have seen him at that table, enjoying himself."

"Yes, it would have been a treat. I always thought he'd do famously at feeding-time. Sorry I wasn't here! So you're willing to go down there even away from Minna, to a home of your own?"

"Zack, it'll be like getting to heaven before the rest of my loved ones. Willing? Can't we start to-day?"

"What a villain I've been! But there's some excuse for me, honey. When I went down there it was mighty hard rowing for awhile. I bought a place according to the style that's in fashion — paid down about all I had, and gave a mortgage for the rest. It was a little orchard, and let me tell you there was tall traveling before a penny came my way! The trees were young, and the seasons were bad for several years in succession, and half a dozen different kinds of bugs had to be sprayed with that many different assortments of sprays, which isn't furnished free by the State, let me tell you! — and then, when a rousing big crop

did show up, blessed if every tree in the country wasn't bursting with fruit so that nobody got anything for apples. And, in the meantime, there was the mortgage-interest to be paid, and corn-meal and bacon to be bought. The hardships would have killed you, honey, not to count starving to death. But I just held my tail between my legs and clung on by my teeth and at last what I was looking for, *came!*"

"Always does!" she cried, a smile flashing through her tears—"look at you!"

"What I hate about this is that I'm never going to be punished as I deserve! You quit a-looking pleased, Minnie, I need discipline! Then a year came so stampeding with good luck that I was able to pay off the mortgage. That made me feel that I was ready to go to living. Next year I made a little—not enough to surprise me, because a small orchard hasn't got a great many trumps up its sleeve. Last year saw me out of the woods; and this year, there's a prospect that 'most any orchardist would shed tears of joy over—thanks to

my patience and learning through many failures, I suspicioned that a new kind of bug was on its way and I sprayed for him betimes — and nearly all the other fellows are watching their fruit fall off the trees while I'm taking a trip back home, knowing mine's going to stick! So last year I had enough to build a house for you —"

"And however humble it is, Zack, however little and plain —"

"*Humble!*" cried Zack, scornfully. "*Little?* Well, I guess when you see that mansion —" At that moment his quick eye recognized his daughter and Jack in a buggy, drawing up before the Home.

"What do you mean, Zack? It is a humble, little cabin, isn't it?"

"Well — er — you don't have to stoop to get through the door. Of course there isn't room in it for a great many people —"

"But just you and me, dear, just you and me —?"

"*Yes*, I 'low enough room'll be found for us two!"

“And the orchard? You spoke as if it were a rather large one, with all that fruit.”

“Oh, a few trees, honey, a few trees. When you want to, you can go out and shake down a few eating-apples, enough to make up in dumplings, and then some. Yes, there are a few trees here and there . . .”

Minna opened the door abruptly, and, hurrying to the couch, sank upon her knees before her mother, whose glad cry of surprise Zack pretended to echo.

“Mother, let me say what I’ve come to say before everything — Father talked to me last night as nobody in the world ever did before, and — and at first I was too amazed, *too* astonished, to know what to think. But it kept me awake all night. It was the truth. It was as if I’d been blind for years. And, oh, Mother, you ought to have told me; although I have failed in my duty as a daughter, isn’t there a tiny excuse because you never taught me what my duty really was? If you had *made* me thoughtful of you instead of always sure

that whatever I wanted to do was the thing to be done!"

"Hush, hush!" cried her mother, in distress, throwing her arms about the bowed head. "It's all right — I'm going away with your father, he has a little cabin built for me, and a few trees —"

"A very rocky country," added Zack, discouragingly.

Minna brightened up. "But I thought father had *nothing*, and Jack and I have come to ask both of you to go with us to our Oklahoma farm. You see, it's under the homestead act and somebody must stay on the place three years, and we thought it would be fine for you out there, and then Jack and I needn't be there all the time. It would be a good thing for you, Jack says, and it would be a good thing for us."

"You must excuse me, Minna, from going to do any sitting on your land — Jack'll have to hold it down himself — that little orchard of mine needs all my time."

"I don't blame you," said Jack, stepping into the room. "I wouldn't go there myself, if I could help it."

"But that isn't what I wanted most to say," Minna interrupted, and then she began to sob convulsively. It was very hard for her to break through that crust of selfishness which had formed about her heart from tenderest years altogether unsuspected by herself. It was almost impossible to confess herself wholly in the wrong without clinging to some excuses, or propose atonement without adding some clause to her own advantage. But she had spoken truly when saying that all night long she had meditated her father's accusation. Its justice she admitted to herself, and now she tried to confess it to her parents. And as, in broken words and with many tears, she tried to express repentance for having placed Mrs. Flood in the Old People's Home, to a greater degree did she realize the loneliness and suffering of which she had been the thoughtless, careless cause.

Mrs. Flood would have spared her every

word of remorse, but the daughter's heart was too sincerely moved to spare itself. Her flood of tears with which her mother's freely mingled, swept away all barriers between the hearts of the small family group, and it ended with many kisses and warm handclaspings.

"I've an ax to grind, out here," Jack said, at last, when tranquillity had been restored, when the parents had forgiven them everything and Minna had forgiven her parents for bringing her up in the ways of selfishness. "I must hunt up Richard, for I've undertaken to bring her and Alfred Montgomery together."

After he had left the room, Minna began whispering to her mother as they sat close on the couch. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed.

"It has made me see everything in such a strange way, Mother," she added, aloud. "It's like a different world when I look around. And — and — that's what's brought me to you more than father's scolding. Because — well, I think in a different way about *mothers* since I learned . . ."

Zack heard only a few of these words, but he turned suddenly away while the tears leaped to his eyes. As it chanced, he found himself facing a mirror, and its reflection showed his face so strangely moved, that his wife exclaimed in alarm, "Zack! Zack! what's the matter?"

He dashed away the mist, and said with a laugh, as he stared at his image in the glass — "I think I see a grandfather!"

CHAPTER XX

UNDER THE COTTONWOOD

WHILE Zack Flood had been cultivating an orchard and building a house in Arkansas considerably more pretentious than he thought it wise to disclose, Alfred Montgomery was building up a substantial law-practice in the city. His health was now excellent, his income assured, and he had developed into a well-proportioned, handsome man, very popular in those social circles which he found most congenial.

This, however, did not content him. He was entering the cool years of the late thirties — cool when one lives alone and returns from some gay party or a hard day's work to find no companionship but that of bachelor-fancies. Unable to drive Richard from his mind, unsuccessful in his efforts to persuade her to receive him, and too proud to force himself upon her

against expressed wishes, still he did not try to replace her image in his imagination by any other.

"But if she won't see me this time," he told Jack Palmer, "I shall never come back to Pendleton."

He had formed the same resolution on his previous visit, only to break it; and if he did not fall in love with somebody between now and next summer, Jack thought it more than likely that he would come again — only, in that case, Richard would be in Arkansas with the Floods.

"I tell you," Jack complained to his wife as they drove back from their visit to the Old People's Home. "I'm discouraged. Alfred's nailed now, but that thing wears out, you know."

"What thing?" Minna returned, coldly. She had not forgotten Juanita and that curious affair of the third diamond.

"Why — oh, not love like mine for you, of course, that's something rather rare in this world, I fancy — but like Alfred's, where

there's nothing to keep it warm. I reasoned with Dicky, I coaxed like a good fellow, argued that since Alfred's father's dead and his step-mother has married again and gone to Kansas there's nothing here to draw him from his work — but she won't see him. Used to have the excuse that Mother needed her, but now since the old man's on deck — Minna, do you reckon I'll ever make as wiry and lasting a father-in-law as the one I've got? Expect he'll outlive us all — he's got the makings of a Methuselah in him! ”

“ I've never understood Richard, and never pretended to,” remarked Minna, shaking her head, “ but I *believe* she is a good girl, and tries to do her duty as she *sees* it.”

“ She never had any interest in live people,” Jack commented. “ Life's nothing to her but ink and paper. If Alf was a manuscript she might get him published; but being a man, she don't know what to do with him. Now that they've actually printed her book, I'm afraid she's done for — will just dry up to a parchment and we'll finally bury her with a

pen. Alas, poor Richard! Oh, I'm discouraged."

So was Alfred, when Jack reported the result of his interview. Pride urged him to flee from the woman who treated him thus unkindly, but pride — seldom consistent — also counseled him to stand his ground, proving himself indifferent to her indifference. Accordingly he remained at the hotel as long as the Floods and Richard staid with Jack and Minna, but without any further effort to meet the girl who had once loved him.

On the afternoon of the day preceding that set for the journey to Arkansas, Alfred was told that a buggy had stopped before the hotel and a lady asked to see him. Supposing he was about to be invited to an informal outing or evening party, he obeyed the summons, excuses forming on his lips. He wished to be alone; no one in that waiting buggy could have surprised him greatly, or caused him a sudden thrill of delight — unless it were Richard.

As it was Richard, he was greatly surprised, and thrilled yet more deeply. Her identity

was not to be questioned; the figure and bearing were those of the night of the masked ball, and the face, though ten years older was the face that had kissed him at the annual picnic. How startled he had been when, that summer afternoon, he looked up, astonished, to catch Richard's features transfigured in a glow of beauty. As he looked up now, he fancied that the girl's affections in their innocent loveliness had been stamped upon cheek and brow, touching them with their charm to a grace never to fade. As their hands clasped, it seemed to him that the fragrant breath of that warm day with its scents of woods and meadowlands came wafted to him across the intervening years.

"Richard!" He still held her hand as if to secure a vision forever eluding him.

"Will you ride with me?" She was not able to conceal her agitation; "I want to say — to discuss business matters with you."

He took his place beside her, moved by the familiar quality of her voice, and at the same time haunted by the fear of late years that she had really lost all interest in him — that her

very love might have reacted against him. For the present, however, it seemed enough to be near her, to feel the light touch of her arm against his, to hear that dear accent, though indeed somewhat unsteady.

As long as they were in town, their topics were impersonal, chief of these, the failure of B. M. Gridge, the rumor that he was to be employed as a clerk in the house where he had so long been the master, the wonder that so careful a man should have lived so far beyond his income, and the fear that Juanita would find her altered circumstances hard to bear. Richard answered abstractedly as if forming in her mind the best way to present those mysterious "business matters" which at the beginning had been sounded as the keynote of their interview.

But Alfred had no intention of letting their relationship rest upon a business plane, and when they were surrounded by green fields —

"Richard, you are just what I wanted you to be, only you needn't have been half so beautiful. And that good, true voice that always

expressed a thousand times more than the words spoken — putting everything into italics and big capitals — I feel as if I hadn't breathed deeply since I heard it last. You've held yourself toward me as a perfect stranger but I can't be a stranger to one with so much of the old-time days in her smile."

"It had to be," she spoke, hurriedly. "My life was so full, *so full!*"

"Full!" he cried, protestingly. "Yes — of a thousand tasks — little duties without end that somebody else should have performed. But a life that's full of ceaseless toil — work that must be done but means nothing in itself — is a very empty life, after all."

"Oh, I had my escape — you forget my writing." Her eyes were starry bright.

"No, I remember your writing, but it could only come at the close of day when you were tired out. If you could know how I have suffered, thinking of you in that Home working with these hands and feet as if they were the hands and feet of — just of anybody else."

"I *am* just anybody," Richard laughed.

"Just anybody who works gladly that somebody else may be happy."

"Yes — I thought of that, I knew why you did it; it didn't make me suffer less to think of your weariness and starved youth — but, oh, how it did teach me to love you!"

She looked at him with clear, earnest eyes, no blush answering his impetuous words. "Don't praise me," she said, gently, "such work should be its own reward. Please let me talk business."

There was something in her manner of speaking the phrase that reminded him of the quaintness of her girlhood. She was so determined to remain calm and self-controlled, as if there were nothing between them after this long separation but "business."

"Richard, kindness to one lonely life hardly justified your unkindness to another lonely mortal — the mortal who now protests that you owe *him* something —"

She interposed with a sudden flashing smile, "Yes! That's exactly why I asked you to take this ride; indeed, I do owe you entirely too

much! But I have all the items in this notebook and if you'll take the lines, I'll check them off."

He obeyed ruefully, and Richard read the sums of money she had received from him by mail, while he, looking down, thought there had never surely been such a charming mouth so filled with unwelcome figures.

"It adds up two hundred and fifty dollars," she concluded, "and seventy-five cents."

"Yes," carelessly, "I knew it was very little."

"And now," she said, with portentous gravity, "do you know why I applied to you for all this money?"

"You wanted some little extras for your aunt and ready money was hard to get."

"But what could you think of a girl who coolly and deliberately asked money of you, not as a favor, but a right — and yet refused to see you?"

"What did I think of you? In such a way that no other girl has ever seemed worth thinking about."

She reproved him gently, "You mustn't answer like *that*. Because, there is an explanation. When Uncle Zack went away, he said arrangements had been made with some one we both trusted, and that whenever I found myself in need, I'd be provided for. Your name had just been mentioned and I was sure that he meant you. But to-day I found out that he meant Mr. Gridge! And I'm wondering what you must have thought of me all this time."

His heart sank. "Don't say you asked my help only because you thought your uncle had commissioned me to help you."

"But could I possibly have done it, otherwise?"

"But I thought—" he looked at her blankly. "Oh, Richard, this is such a disappointment! I thought . . ."

"Yes, I was afraid of that," she answered, somewhat breathlessly, while the color stole to her cheeks. "Just as soon as Uncle Zack explained — this morning — I was afraid that you must have had *some* thought, and —"

He drove on for a time in silence, more de-

pressed by her explanation than he cared to confess. "It seemed all that I had left of your friendship," he said, presently. "I'd lost your dear comradeship, but I still had your faith in me. Now it seems even that was meant for somebody else."

She interrupted, in a fluttering voice, trying to hold her gaze steady. "But you must tell me what you thought, even if it is hard for you, because only in that way can everything be made clear. Do not let us part this time, Alfred, with any misunderstanding. You thought —?"

"Oh, what does that matter, Richard? It is past. It seems I was mistaken."

"You thought — yes, I must tell you — that I could ask it of you because I — because of what you learned that day at the picnic — Won't you help me, Alfred? It isn't as easy to say it as it was ten years ago."

"I will say it for you," he answered, his heart suddenly leaping in tumultuous hope as the color deepened in her cheeks, while her eyes no longer met his searching look. "I thought that you still loved me."

"I was afraid of it! I knew it!" she faltered. "And because you imagined that I still — did, it kept me in your thoughts and so — and *that* is why —"

"Richard, do you want me to think that you no longer love me?"

Her face paled, but her voice grew firmer. "Yes — I want you to think that it — is all over."

"And I must go away — back to the city — back to my life of loneliness with no hope that your love for me is as strong as it used to be?"

"Yes."

"Even when I tell you that the thought of you has become the most sacred influence of my life — that every year of your humble and silent service has added its weight to the strength of my love, yes, that I loved you before I saw you, loved you for your life, your beautiful life — and now that I see your face, I find it the symbol of all I ever truly loved! — in spite of all this, can you say that you do not love me?"

"But, Alfred — but, don't you see, all this

— what you say now — is because of what I told you that day at the picnic? And if you hadn't learned about it, and imagined I still cared for you as I did when a child —”

“It doesn't matter how love comes, if it comes to stay. If you can deny your love, I'll believe what you want me to believe. You couldn't wrong anything so beautiful, so sweet, so pure, by refusing to acknowledge it if it still lives. I tell you once again, I love you, darling. Can you say that you do not love me?” There was a pause. “Say it if you can!” he cried out, with something like triumph in his voice. “Say it, Richard!”

But Richard could not say it.

It was not long after that before they came in sight of the cottonwood tree — for where there is love there are trees. “Oh, that faithful tree!” cried Richard, smiling through her tears. “Look — it has been waiting for us ever since the day we passed it on our way from the station — do you remember?”

“— And I remember you told me about your poem that described it. You wondered if you

would be as brave as it if you were left to stand all alone, no friends near you, no birds, perhaps, to sing for you — would you go on ‘rippling out your happy music, keeping your shade for some weary traveler’?”

“I had forgotten all about it,” she answered, happily. “To think of your keeping that in your mind!”

“No, in my soul! Many and many a time I’ve thought of it; for you have stood all alone, no friends, no birds — but bless your dear face, your dear, faithful heart! your music *has* rippled out, and you *are* a blessing to the weary traveler. You’re a true sister to the tree — wave it good-by.”

Richard laughed and waved at the waving tree, and passed on with smiles and tears, never again to stand alone.

THE END



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